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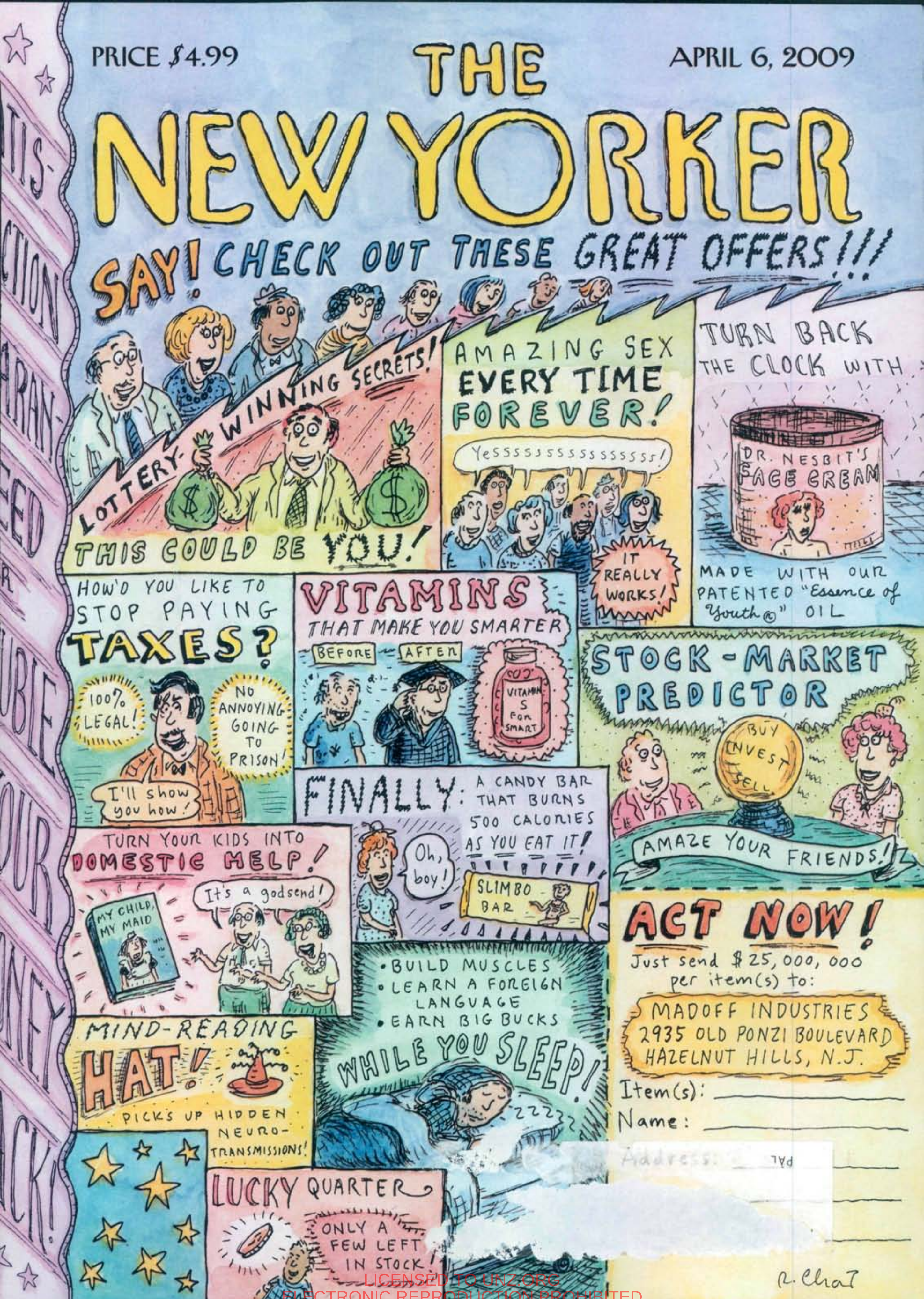
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# THE NEW YORKER

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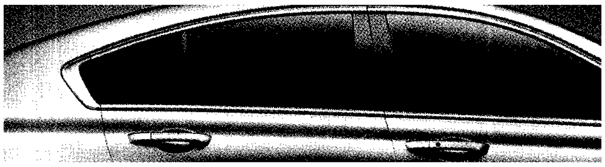

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REFLECTION

by Bob Staake
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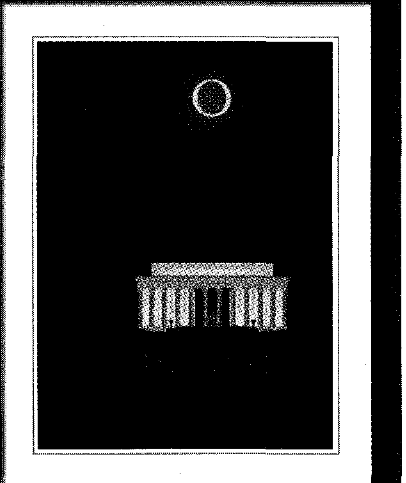

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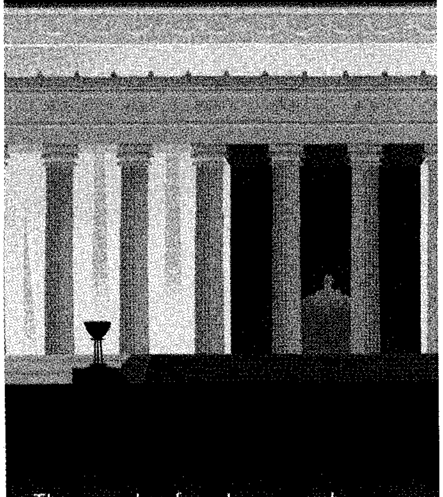

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# CONTRIBUTORS

Seymour M. Hersh ("Syria Calling," p. 26) has written eight books, including "Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib," which is available in paperback.

Nicholas Lemann (Comment, p. 21) is the dean of the Columbia School of Journalism.

Bruce McCall (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 33) is a regular contributor of art and humor pieces. His books include "All Meat Looks Like South America," a humor collection, and "Marveltown," a children's book.

Tad Friend ("Cash for Keys," p. 34) writes the Letter from California for the magazine. His new book, "Cheerful Money," a family memoir, comes out in the fall.

A. S. Byatt (Poem, p. 54), a novelist and short-story writer, won the Booker Prize for "Possession." The poem here is included in "The Children's Book," her new novel, which will be published in October.

Roz Chast (Cover) created the illustrations for the children's book "Dot in Larryland," by Patricia Marx, which was published in December. This is her thirteenth cover for the magazine.

Rebecca Mead ("Couplet," p. 42) has been writing for the magazine since 1997. She is the author of "One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding."

John Colapinto ("Message in a Bottle," p. 50) is a staff writer and the author of "As Nature Made Him" and "About the Author."

Brad Watson (Fiction, p. 62), who teaches at the University of Wyoming, has published a novel and a book of short stories. His next collection, "Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives," is due out next year.

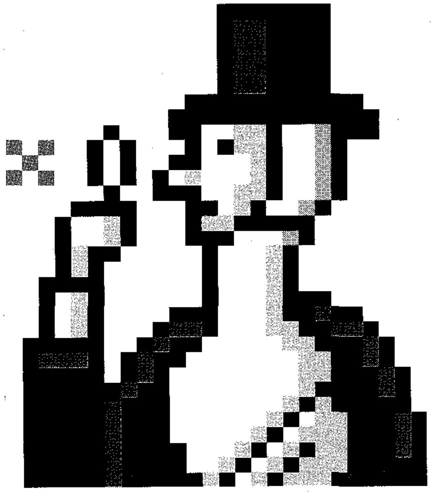
Lawrence Raab (Poem, p. 64) is a professor of English at Williams College. His seventh collection of poems, "The History of Forgetting," will be published in June.

Anthony Gottlieb (Books, p. 70), a former executive editor of *The Economist*, is the author of "The Dream of Reason: A History of Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance." He is working on a book entitled "Why Nothing Matters."

Peter Schjeldahl (The Art World, p. 76), the magazine's art critic, is the author of "Let's See: Writings on Art from *The New Yorker*."

**THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM**

Audio: The Political Scene, a weekly conversation hosted by *Dorothy Wickenden.* / *Peter Schjeldahl* talks about art at the Frick. / Video: The making of Plastiki. / Ask the Author: *Seymour M. Hersh* takes questions. / The Book Club reads Orwell's "Down and Out in Paris and London." / Blogs: *James Surowiecki* follows the economy, the Cartoon Lounge holds a dog-cartoon contest, plus News Desk, the Book Bench, Goings On, and posts by *Hendrik Hertzberg, George Packer, Steve Coll,* and *Sasha Frere-Jones.* / Animated cartoons, the caption contest, and a complete archive of issues, back to 1925.



# THE MAIL

## A STICKY WICKET

Alec Wilkinson makes a valiant effort to explain (some) of the laws of cricket ("Not Quite Cricket," March 9th). However, he makes one error of vocabulary when he says, "A bowler in cricket throws a series of six balls to the batsman" and "in Test cricket . . . roughly four hundred and fifty overs are thrown in the course of a match." The laws of cricket clearly state, "For a delivery to be fair . . . the ball must not be thrown." Continual throwing, defined as a partial or complete straightening of the arm once it has reached the level of the shoulder during the delivery of the ball, is punishable by removal of the bowler from the game. Instead, the ball is to be bowled, with elbow slightly bent at shoulder level during delivery. I fully accept that pointing this out fast-tracks me into the Pedantry Hall of Fame, but international incidents have been provoked by how far a bowler's arm is allowed to flex, most recently in 2004, when the Australian Prime Minister John Howard accused Sri Lanka's Muttiah Muralitharan of being a "chucker."

*Scott Ashley*
*Morpeth, U.K.*

## GRAMMATICALLY SPEAKING

Bernard Madoff may be guilty on many counts, but—at least in the trial excerpts quoted by Nancy Franklin—using the passive voice is not, technically, one of them (The Talk of the Town, March 23rd). Her point, however, is well taken. In one statement to Judge Chin, Madoff, instead of using "I" as the subject, as the agent of his action, uses "my fraud"—as if it had a life of its own.

*Martha Kolln*
*Bellefonte, Pa.*

## LADIES OF THE NIGHT

While the New Woman is certainly one of the lurking fears of Bram Stoker's novel, it is not in the person of Mina Harker that she poses her most dramatic threat (Books, by Joan Acocella, March 16th). Mina is safely domesticated, all her technological competence and feistiness subordinated to the service of the Victorian knights who are fighting for her "purity." The nightmare version of the New Woman appears in the women who are "vampirized" by the elusive count. In fact, he is so elusive that he rarely appears in the novel. The real terror that we see up close lies in his female victims, in whom he turns loose the kind of voracious aggressive sexuality that haunted the Victorian male imagination.

*Gail Griffin*
*Kalamazoo, Mich.*

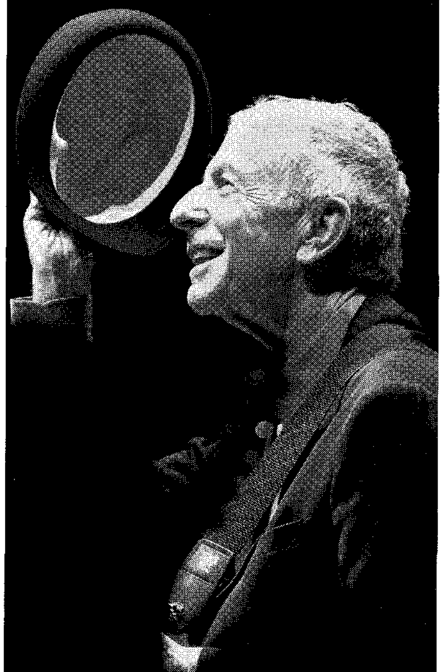
## BROOKLYN BASEBALL

In his article about the architecture of New York's new baseball stadiums, Paul Goldberger writes, "A pastiche of the Dodgers' former field in Brooklyn pasted onto the façade of a different team's twenty-first-century ballpark in Queens is less a historical tribute than it is an act of make-believe" (The Sky Line, March 23rd). While the Mets are, of course, a different team, they are very much the spiritual heirs of the Dodgers. It's likely that many more Brooklyn fans adopted the Mets after we were abandoned than stuck with the transplanted Dodgers or shifted their allegiance to the other New York team. Half a century later, those of us who grew up living and dying with Brooklyn still experience the same mix of entertainment, pleasure, and frustration (mostly the latter) with the Mets as we did with the Dodgers. The structure of the new stadium is not so much a historical tribute as an appropriate recognition of historical continuity.

*Allan Berlind*
*Middletown, Conn.*

•

*Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. All letters become the property of The New Yorker and will not be returned; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.*



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EXPLORE: IRELAND

# History Comes Alive

When planning your trip to Ireland, allow for spontaneity in your itinerary and let the people you meet spark your imagination.

**One of the best ways to experience a place is through its people. With their rich historical knowledge—and eagerness to share it with visitors—Ireland's museum directors help bring these vital cultural institutions to life.**

"We try to get beyond the legends and the shamrocks," says Dr. Tim Campbell, the director of the **Saint Patrick Centre**, in County Down. Open daily, the interactive exhibit focuses on the historical life and letters of Ireland's beloved patron saint.

Located beside Down Cathedral and the site designated as Patrick's grave, the center is a hub on the new Saint Patrick's Trail through Northern Ireland. It is also about twenty miles from the capital city of Belfast, where you can tour the baronial Stormont Estate.

The magnificent **Strokestown Park** house and garden, in County Roscommon, was the home of the Mahon family from the eighteenth century until 1979. It was acquired by the Westward Group, a company committed to the preservation of the estate's original furnishings, the site's restoration, and its importance to local heritage. In addition to the mansion, the acclaimed revitalization project fully restored a four-acre walled garden, a Georgian peach house and vinery, and gazebo.

Located in the original stable yards, the Famine Museum attempts to balance the aristocratic legacy of the luxurious main house with the tragic time in Irish history. Open daily through October, the museum contains photos and documents including actual, heart-wrenching letters written by the tenants on the estate.

Another prominent historical figure, Queen Victoria, was a guest at **Muckross House**, situated in the spectacular 26,000-acre Killarney National Park, in County Kerry. "She stayed for two nights in 1861," notes director Pat Dawson.

Woodlands, mountains, and three lakes are also part of the property, which is open daily. And the park is home to the only native herd of red deer in Ireland.

"As the folk museum of County Kerry, our mission is to preserve local crafts and skills," adds Dawson. Visitors can tour a traditional working farm and three separate workshops dedicated to pottery, weaving, and bookbinding.

Ireland's historical houses and cultural centers—and the people who staff them—serve as generational bridges between past and present. For travelers who leave room for spontaneity in their itinerary, these institutions can also inspire geographical journeys to points previously unimagined.

*CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT:* MUCKROSS ESTATE ©MIRIAM SCHLICHTER; KILLARNEY NATIONAL PARK ©DANIEL ACEVEDO/ALAMY; DR. TIM CAMPBELL COURTESY OF SAINT PATRICK

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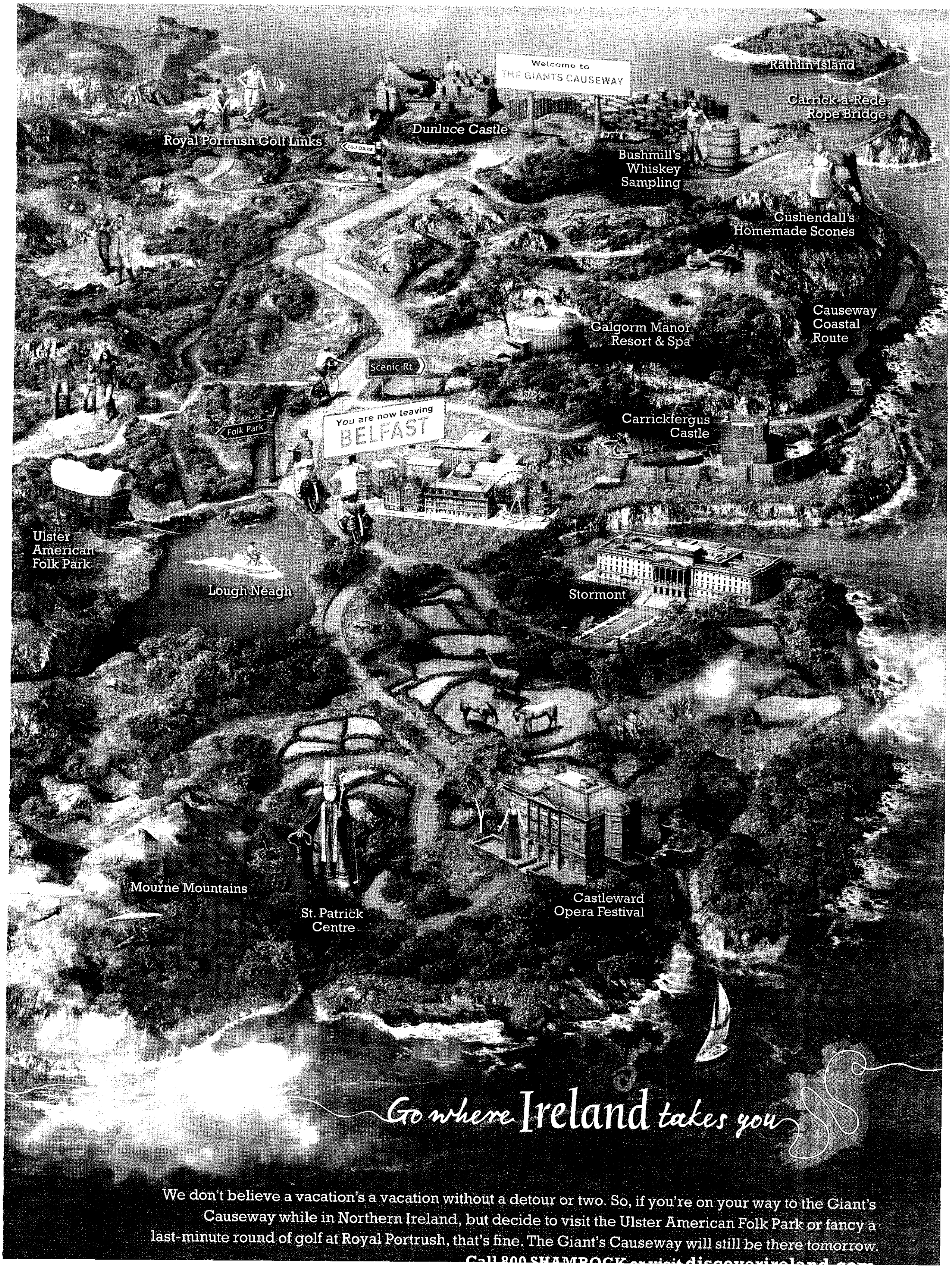
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We don't believe a vacation's a vacation without a detour or two. So, if you're on your way to the Giant's Causeway while in Northern Ireland, but decide to visit the Ulster American Folk Park or fancy a last-minute round of golf at Royal Portrush, that's fine. The Giant's Causeway will *still be there tomorrow.*

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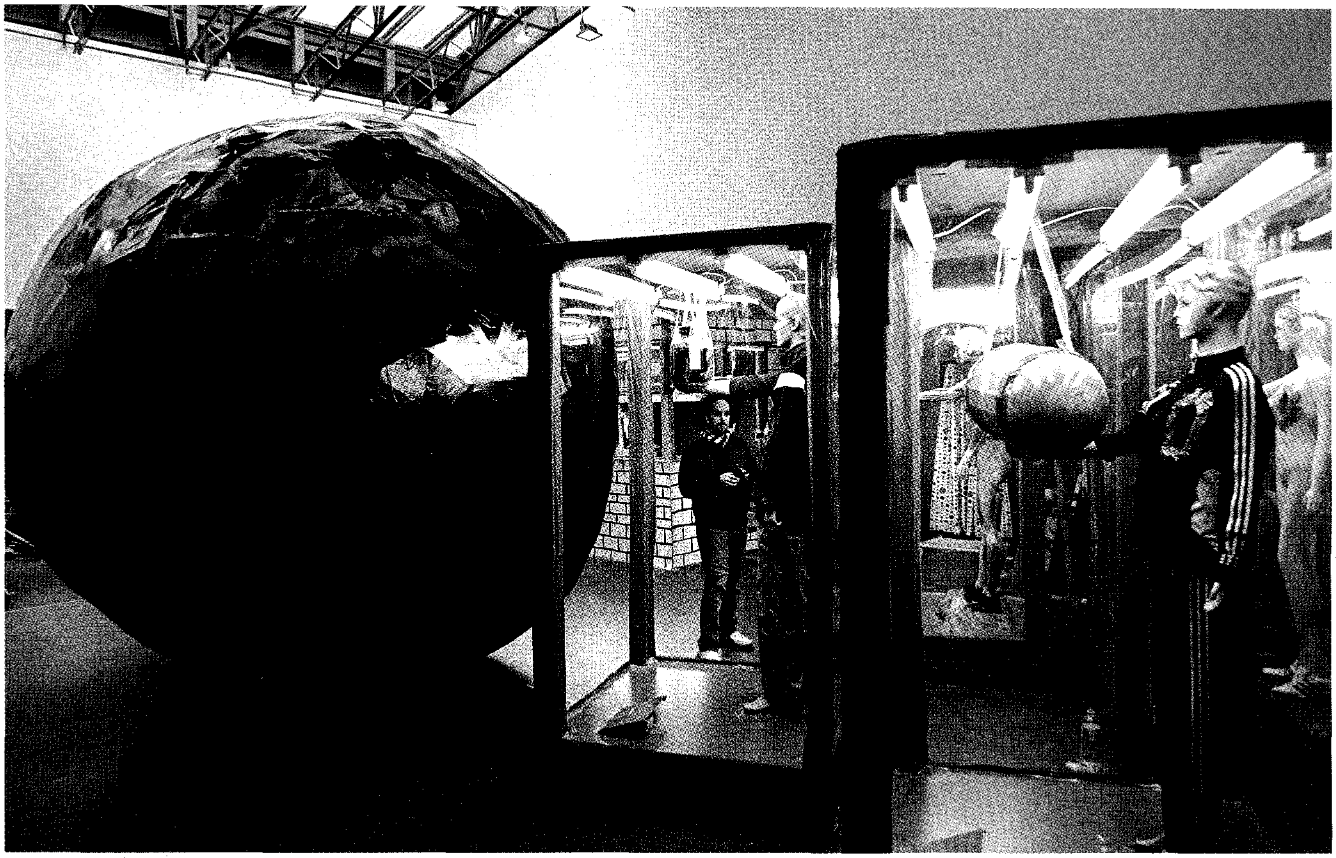

*Thomas Hirschhorn's "Universal Gym," at Gladstone. Photograph by Gus Powell.*

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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## THIS WEEK

### THE THEATRE
#### BARELY GETTIN' BY

Nearly three decades after Dolly Parton, Lily Tomlin, and Jane Fonda kidnapped Dabney Coleman on the big screen, "9 to 5" makes its Broadway début, with music and lyrics by Parton and a book by Patricia Resnick. Allison Janney, Stephanie J. Block, and Megan Hilty play the fed-up secretaries, and Marc Kudisch plays the cruel, lecherous boss who is the source of their aggravation. Joe Mantello directs, at the Marquis. (See page 10.)

### NIGHT LIFE
#### ON THE MOVE

Zizek Urban Beats Club is a biweekly party in Buenos Aires where electrified cumbia is all the rage; now the folks behind it are taking its most popular artists on an American tour, with stops at Santos Party House and Union Pool. American audiences will no doubt be as susceptible as the Argentineans are to the thick and freaky rhythms. (See page 12.)

### ART
#### LIVE CHAT

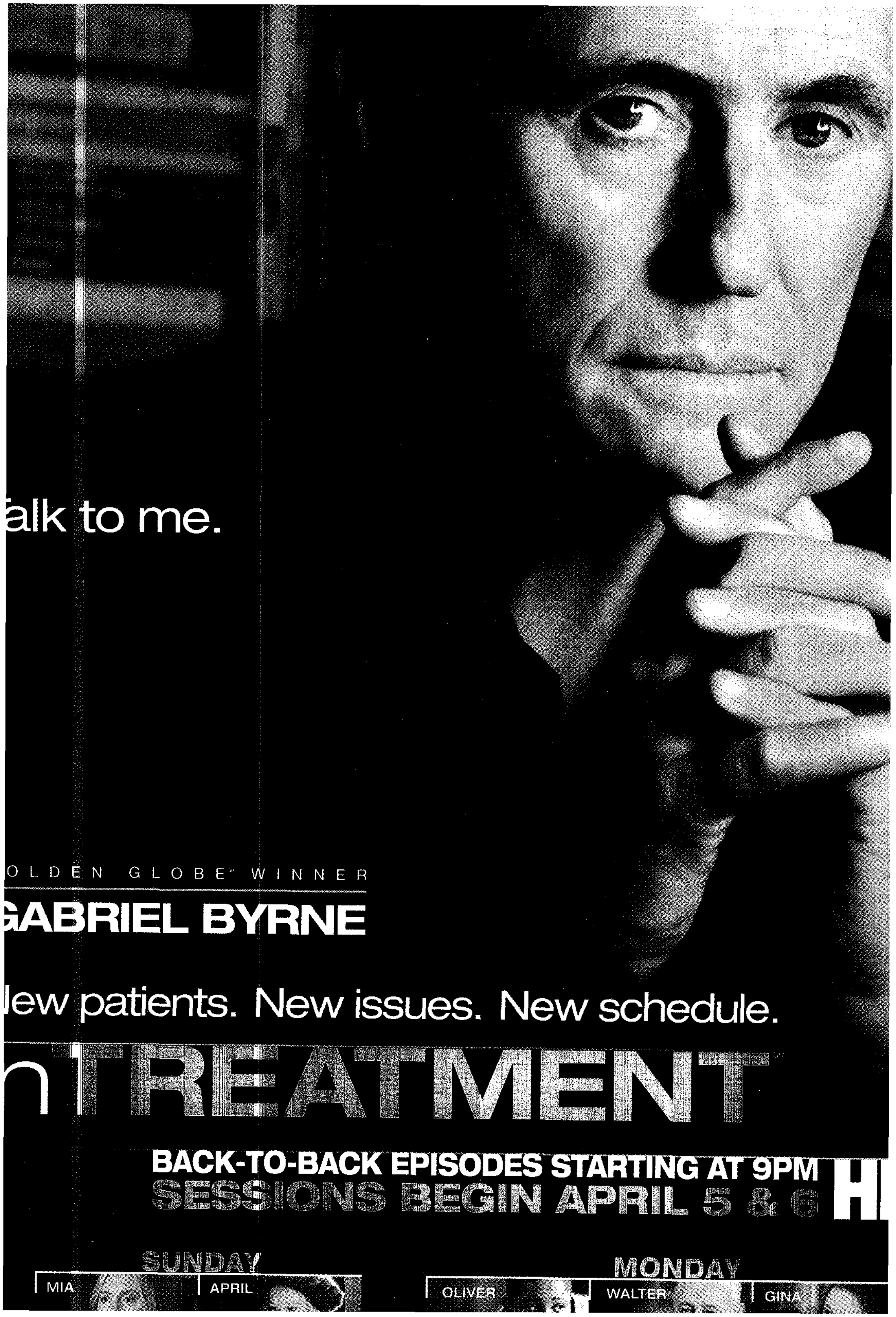
Yoko Ono will talk about Asian art with the Guggenheim curator Alexandra Munroe—and spring a participatory event on the audience—as part of the exhibition "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia." (See page 12.)

### CLASSICAL MUSIC
#### PASSION PLAYS

No music is more deeply associated with Easter than the Passions of J. S. Bach. Audiences will be able to hear the St. Matthew Passion in either the refined Anglican style perfected by John Scott and the St. Thomas Choir or the more robust fashion favored by Kent Tritle and the Choirs and Orchestra of St. Ignatius Loyola. (See page 15.)

### MOVIES
#### A WONDERFUL LIFE

Jackie Raynal started as an editor, working on the compilation film "Six in Paris," and then became a filmmaker. French Institute Alliance Française pays tribute to works she edited, programmed, and directed, including a world première; she'll be on hand for many screenings. (See page 18.)



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# THE THEATRE
## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

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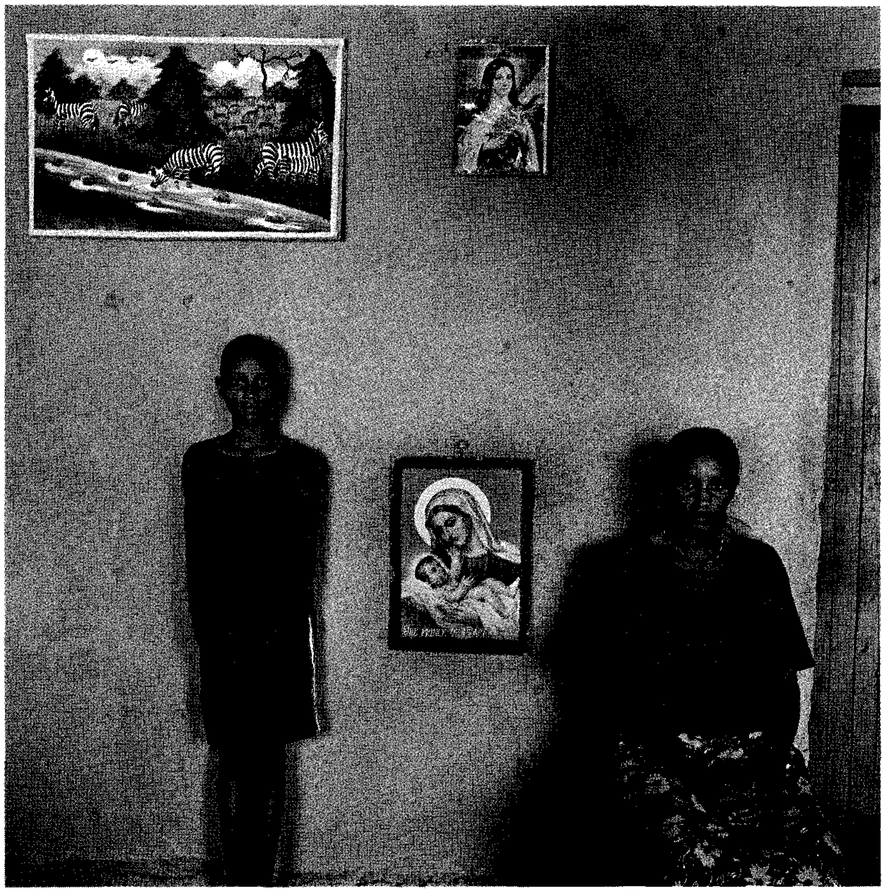
**ACCENT ON YOUTH**
Manhattan Theatre Club presents Samson Raphaelson's comedy, in which a struggling playwright becomes inspired by his secretary and produces a Broadway hit. David Hyde Pierce and Charles Kimbrough star; Daniel Sullivan directs. Previews begin April 7. (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)



*"Sylvian with Her Daughter, Marianne," by Jonathan Torgovnik, at Aperture.*

**BEING AUDREY**
The Transport Group presents the world première of a musical, with music and lyrics by Ellen Weiss, about a woman who fantasizes about being the heroines in Audrey Hepburn movies. Directed by Jack Cummings III. In previews. Opens April 5. (Connelly, 220 E. 4th St. 212-352-3101.)

**BEOWULF: A THOUSAND YEARS OF BAGGAGE**
Shotgun Players perform a comedy with music derived from the epic poem. Written by Jason Craig, with music by Dave Malloy; Rod Hipskind directs. In previews. Opens April 5. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-352-3101.)

**CHASING MANET**
Primary Stages presents a new comedy by Tina Howe, about a painter from Boston and her friend, who plan to escape a nursing home via the QE2 to Paris. Jane Alexander stars; Michael Wilson directs. In previews. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

**EVERYDAY RAPTURE**
Dick Scanlan and Sherie Rene Scott, who also stars, wrote this coming-of-age story about a Mennonite girl who goes to Manhattan. Michael Mayer directs. Previews begin April 7. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

**ILIAD: BOOK ONE**
Peter Meineck directs Aquila Theatre's production of the first part of Homer's epic poem. In previews. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

**JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE**
Bartlett Sher directs a Lincoln Center Theatre production of August Wilson's play, set in Pittsburgh in 1911. The cast includes Chad Coleman, Ernie Hudson, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Roger Robinson, and Arliss Howard. In previews. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

**KNIVES AND OTHER SHARP OBJECTS**
As part of the Public LAB series, Felix Solis directs Raúl Castillo's play, about two Latina sisters who move in with their rich relatives in Texas. In previews. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

**MARY STUART**
Janet McTeer and Harriet Walter star in Peter Oswald's new version of Friedrich Schiller's play from 1800, about Elizabeth I and her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots. Phyllida Lloyd directs. In previews. (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

**NEXT TO NORMAL**
This musical about a dysfunctional family, which opened at Second Stage last year, has music by Tom Kitt and a book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey. Michael Greif directs. In previews. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

**9 TO 5: THE MUSICAL**
Allison Janney, Stephanie J. Block, Megan Hilty, and Marc Kudisch star in the musical version of the 1980 movie, with original music and lyrics by Dolly Parton and a book by Patricia Resnick. Joe Mantello directs. Previews begin April 7. (Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

**THE NORMAN CONQUESTS**
Alan Ayckbourn's comic trilogy transfers from the Old Vic, directed by Matthew Warchus. "Table Manners," "Living Together," and "Round and Round the Garden" all take place over one weekend at an English country house in the nineteen-seventies. Previews begin April 7. (Circle in the Square, 235 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

**AN ORESTEIA**
Classic Stage Company presents a piece by Anne Carson, which gathers the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to tell the story of the House of Atreus. Part One is directed by Brian Kulick and Gisela Cardenas; Part Two is directed by Paul Lazar and choreographed by Annie-B Parson. Opens April 1. (136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101.)

**REASONS TO BE PRETTY**
Neil LaBute's comic drama, in which a man's comments about a co-worker's attractiveness get back to his girlfriend, moves to Broadway. Marin Ireland, Steven Pasquale, Piper Perabo, and Thomas Sadoski star; Terry Kinney directs. In previews. Opens April 2. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

**ROCK OF AGES**
The eighties-era rock musical, written by Chris D'Arienzo, transfers to Broadway. Kristin Hanggi directs. In previews. Opens April 7. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

**THE TOXIC AVENGER**
A new musical based on Lloyd Kaufman's 1985 film, about a New Jersey science student who is turned into a mutant superhero. With a book and lyrics by Joe DiPietro ("I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change") and music and lyrics by David Bryan (of Bon Jovi); directed by John Rando ("Urinetown"). In previews. Opens April 6. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

**WAITING FOR GODOT**
Roundabout Theatre Company presents Samuel Beckett's masterpiece, starring Bill Irwin (as Vladimir) and Nathan Lane (as Estragon). Also with John Goodman (Pozzo) and John Glover (Lucky). Anthony Page directs. Previews begin April 3. (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

**WHY TORTURE IS WRONG, AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM**
The world première of an absurdist comedy by Christopher Durang, about a woman who fears that her husband is a terrorist and that her parents work for the government. Laura Benanti stars; Nicholas Martin directs. In previews. Opens April 6. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

## NOW PLAYING

**EXIT THE KING**
Geoffrey Rush (in his Broadway début), Susan Sarandon, Lauren Ambrose, and Andrea Martin star in the Eugène Ionesco comedy, translated and directed by Neil Armfield. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

**GOD OF CARNAGE**
In Christopher Hampton's excellent translation, the French playwright Yasmina Reza's dark and hilarious farce (elegantly directed by Matthew Warchus) has been relocated from Paris to the comfortable upper-middle-class environs of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. Henry, the aggrieved eleven-year-old son of Michael and Veronica Novak (James Gandolfini and Marcia Gay Harden), has had two teeth knocked out by Benjamin, the son of Alan and Annette Raleigh (Jeff Daniels and Hope Davis). Gandolfini, who brilliantly manages his character's arc from genteel to goniff, earns every moment of Reza's fun, and Hope Davis, as Annette, is an elegant package of repressed nastiness. In ninety minutes of sustained mayhem, Reza wipes the masks of sang-froid off her whole monstrous regiment and demonstrates just how thin a line lies between civility and barbarity. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/30/09.) (Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

**THE GOOD NEGRO**
In her latest play, at the Public, Tracey Scott Wilson grapples with the theme of the confluence of racism, carnal desire, religious hypocrisy, and the civil-rights movement. Gary Thomas Rowe, Jr. (Erik Jensen), a virulent racist straight out of the "Mandingo" school of Southern grotesques, lives in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1962. A caricature of a redneck, he tries to make a citizen's arrest of a black woman, Claudette Sullivan (Joniece Abbott-Pratt), who, to him, is nothing more than a disobedient "nigger" whose further oppression will feed his scarecrow ego. As directed by Liesl Tommy, the play's various plots

and subplots move along with a kind of cinematic ease, though they are sometimes bogged down by Wilson's dialogue, which is used more often to make a point than to reveal the inner lives of the characters. (3/30/09) (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

**IMPRESSIONISM**
Michael Jacobs's play about love and the art of seeing is as awkward as it is sublime. Thomas (Jeremy Irons) and Katharine (the pellucid Joan Allen) are co-workers at a gallery—although Katharine, a wounded romantic, is more in the business of dissuading customers from buying her favorite pieces than of selling them. Between patrons, they pass the hours debating cranberry muffins versus coffee cake, Photo-Realism versus splotches of paint. The dialogue is lovely and jumbled, and, as one senses that the dramatic arc has been sublimated to a near-vanishing point, it becomes easier to sit back and enjoy the play's brazen sweetness, its openhearted humor, and, most of all, the ravishing projections of Klimts and Renoirs employed by Jack O'Brien, whose directorial eye is nothing if not painterly. (Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

**INKED BABY**
Lena (Angela Lewis) is carrying her brother-in-law's baby—a favor for her sister (LaChanze), who has had several miscarriages, that immediately creates household tension. The emotional deterioration of the family is soon echoed in the outside world, as a mysterious ailment descends on the neighborhood, causing a weird black paste to form in people's mouths. One by one, the characters are "sampled" by a bureaucrat in a lab coat, a development that suggests some kind of public-health conspiracy. Whatever larger plight this is supposed to represent—the institutional neglect of African-American communities, perhaps—is left uncertain in Christina Anderson's workmanlike script, which manages to make both infidelity and urban plague seem humdrum. Kate Whoriskey directs. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through April 5.)

**PEOPLE WITHOUT HISTORY**
Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players present an experimental work. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 212-479-0808. Through April 5.)

**RAMBO SOLO**
Nature Theatre of Oklahoma performs a piece inspired by the film "Rambo: First Blood," conceived and directed by Kelly Copper and Pavol Liska. (Reviewed in this issue.) (SoHo Rep, 46 Walker St. 212-352-3101.)

**WEST SIDE STORY**
Under the sure-handed direction of Arthur Laurents, who wrote the musical's original book, everything about this show is streamlined: the fluid jolt of Jerome Robbins's choreography; the exhilarating syncopation of Leonard Bernstein's symphonic score; the bravura concision of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics; the swiftness of Laurents's storytelling. When Tony (the excellent Matt Cavenaugh) spots Maria (the radiant Josefina Scaglione) at a high-school dance, he is instantly under her spell, and we are, too. Scaglione's innocence and sweetness are underlined by the shrewd casting of the rollicking Karen Olivo as Maria's older confidante, Anita, who is also the knowing girlfriend of Maria's brother, Bernardo (George Akram), whom Tony accidentally stabs during a gang dustup. With such a sweeping canvas, the musical's characterizations are necessarily two-dimensional; the actors must bring a vivid sense of personality to their roles. Here, for the most part, they succeed. (3/30/09) (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

## *Also Playing*

**ASTRONOME: A NIGHT AT THE OPERA:** Ontological-Hysteric, St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-352-3101. Through April 5. **AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BLITHE SPIRIT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS:** Minetta Lane, 18 Minetta Lane. 212-307-4100. Through April 5. **HEROES:** Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. **HUMOR ABUSE:** City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **INCIDENT AT VICHY:** Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. **OUR TOWN:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444. **RUINED:** City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **33 VARIATIONS:** O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **THE WIDOWING OF MRS. HOLROYD:** Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 212-315-0231. Through April 5.

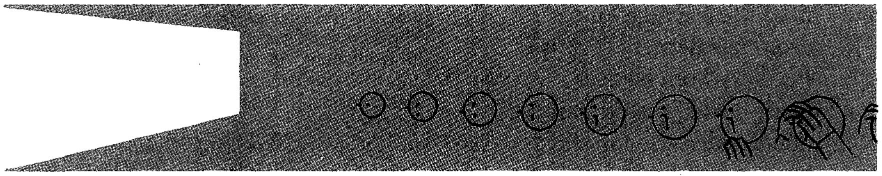
## NIGHT LIFE
## ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.*

**B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL**
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—April 2: **Karla Bonoff** began as a backup singer for Linda Ronstadt and Wendy Waldman before releasing her self-titled début album, in 1977. It was a strong collection that seemed to augur a career on a par with her Southern California country-rock contemporaries Jackson Browne and the Eagles. Though that never really happened, her tunes were picked up and recorded by the likes of Ronstadt ("Someone to Lay Down Beside Me"), Bonnie Raitt ("Home"), and Lynn Anderson ("Isn't It Always Love"). April 4: **Jack Bruce** will, of course, always be known as the bassist, singer, and principal composer (with the lyricist Pete Brown) of the original rock power trio, Cream. But, apart from the occasional reunion with Ginger Baker or Eric Clapton or both, the bulk of Bruce's career has been spent playing jazzier, free-form experimental music, with fluid fretless fingerwork and challenging vocals. Last year, he released a six-CD retrospective, "Can You Follow?," which includes music dating back to the early sixties. See if it's possible for Bruce to do a show that doesn't include "Sunshine of Your Love." April 5: The jazz-guitar giant **John Scofield**, who has played with Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Chet Baker, has long had a soft spot for the blues. He fully embraces that music—along with old-time gospel—on his latest album, "Piety Street," which he recorded with the keyboardist and vocalist Jon Cleary, the drummer Ricky Fataar, and the bassist George Porter, Jr. They're joining him here for what promises to be a hot night of holy sounds.

**CITY WINERY**
143 Varick St. (212-608-0555)—April 7: **Steve Nieve** has played keyboards for Elvis Costello since 1977. During that time, Costello has plied punk, garage, country, classical, and jazz styles, and Nieve has been a significant collaborator throughout. In 2007, he released a CD of his opera, "Welcome to the Voice," which juxtaposes jazz and rock singers with classically trained ones. Here, Nieve will be joined by the experimental cellist **Vincent Segal** (whose electric-cello playing is positively Hendrix-like) and other guests.

**GOODBYE BLUE MONDAY**
1087 Broadway, Brooklyn (718-453-6343)—April 7: The **Bushwick Book Club.** One of Brooklyn's scrappiest cultural institutions hosts a new kind of book club, where singer-songwriters riff on a particular title and book-themed food and drink are served. At this month's gathering, participants perform original tunes inspired by Roald Dahl's "James and the Giant Peach,"



LAURENT CILLUFFO

## DVD NOTES
## THE PAST LIES AHEAD

Drancy, a Paris suburb that during the Second World War was the site of a transit camp from which Jews were shipped off to Auschwitz and Sobibor, now features a shopping center and a tram station bearing the dubious name Drancy-Avenir (Drancy-Future). In Arnaud des Pallières's 1997 film, "**Drancy Avenir**" (only recently released here on DVD, by Facets), a historian and a researcher participate in the director's exploration of the moral, psychological, and political traces of France's wartime crimes.

Eschewing talking-head interviews and archival footage, des Pallières puts Holocaust testimony into surprising contexts. A survivor's shocked description of the Drancy camp and his horror at returning to an indifferent France is heard over a view through a window into a courtyard in modern-day Drancy and continues over a clip of Orson Welles playing Shylock in a production of "The Merchant of Venice." The juxtaposition suggests, as the history teacher declares, that what is at stake in reaching the truth about France's role in the deportations is nothing less than "humanity's cultural heritage."

Even the architectural splendors of France, seen in an upward-tilted tracking shot, are tarnished by a voice-over describing the applause that rained down from windows as Jews were rounded up in the streets below. Another sequence features passages from Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" that, heard during an idyllic riverboat trip through a painterly landscape, disturbingly foreshadow Europe's coming massacres; the scene, with its massed and looming trees and shimmering, shadowed water, conjures a Monet in motion. In des Pallières's film, even France's natural and cultural landscapes seem defiled by the crimes that were brewing there.

Des Pallières makes clear that today's politics are also very much in the balance, as indicated by his work with the researcher, who is studying survivors' accounts of the camp and also "the elusive relationship between the old concentration camp and the present housing project" that occupies the site. She describes visits with her friend Mohamed, who grew up in the project and, despite his awareness of its history, was in the habit of making anti-Semitic remarks. While she wanders through the neighborhood—in luminous images that capture the textures and moods of contemporary France—and watches children at play in local yards, we hear a survivor's daughter relate the sufferings of Jewish children in Drancy at the hands of French officials. French identity and inner life are shown to be composed, in part, of these horrors—of the ability to inflict them and the fact of having borne them.

It's jolting to learn, in the film's end credits, that the interviewees and reciters are actors and that the testimony and texts come from published sources. Des Pallières is indeed aestheticizing the Holocaust, which seems to be both his challenge and his point: the remedy for tainted beauty is a beauty that, by confronting the taint, attempts to expiate it.

*—Richard Brody*

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
## MASTER CLASS

In August of 2008, the twenty-seven-year-old Israeli musician Ophir Kutiel (known as Kutiman) was browsing YouTube for instructional clips, looking for, he says, "new licks, you know, something for piano or guitar or drums"—all instruments that he plays. He found a tutorial video from the legendary funk drummer Bernard (Pretty) Purdie, whom he had never heard of. Kutiman downloaded the clip and began to play with it using a software package called Vegas Pro. Out of clips uploaded to YouTube by other musicians, Kutiman stitched together more than a hundred performances, created an album, and uploaded the entire project to thru-you.com, where each song has embedded links to the sampled musicians. The effect is breathtaking—total strangers collaborating on what sound like live songs. In less than a month, the videos have been viewed almost four million times. Kutiman, who told me he's not a huge fan of touring, may have found a way to take a top-drawer band around the world without ever leaving the house.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

and white wine with fresh puréed peaches and Eastern European peach cookies are on the menu. The musicians include **Phoebe Kreutz, Dibson Hoffweiller, Amy Kohn, Matthew Varvil, Jonathan Vincent, Susan Hwang, Sara Lautman,** and **Ben Krieger.**

**(LE) POISSON ROUGE**
158 Bleecker St. (212-796-0741)—April 1: The sensual-minded French producer and songwriter **Sebastien Tellier** makes a rare New York club appearance with songs from his new electro-pop album, "Sexuality." Tellier, most widely known here for his airy sonic contribution to Sofia Coppola's film "Lost in Translation," is adept at melding melodic keyboard figures, fractured electronica beats, and a soft, bossa-nova-tinged vocal style into catchy songs. For those who understand French, the echoes of Serge Gainsbourg's infamous erotic duets will be clear; for those who don't, the music itself is evocative enough.

**MERCURY LOUNGE**
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—April 1: The **Gourds,** a fun-loving postmodern honky-tonk quintet from Austin, Texas, stop by with songs from their new album, "Haymaker!" The members of this roots-based group, a mainstay of Austin's heterodox music scene, are as comfortable covering Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice" as they are playing a Texas two-step. The new record showcases tight musicianship and lovely, down-home violin and accordion soloing, but what stands out are the clever, self-deprecating lyrics: "I lost ten years down there smoking that Pachuca weed, I was Rip Van Winkle but I thought I was Apollo Creed," goes "Tex-Mex Mile," the Gourds' ode to South Austin.

**SANTOS PARTY HOUSE**
96 Lafayette St. (212-584-5492)—April 4: The **Zizek Club** tour brings in **Fauna, Douster,** and **El G,** from Buenos Aires, playing electrified cumbia.

**TERMINAL 5**
610 W. 56th St. (212-582-6600)—April 1: Cherry-picking elements from sixties psychedelia and nineties "shoegazer" pop, the **Brian Jonestown Massacre** puts out a heady brand of indie rock. Its front man, Anton Newcombe, is known for unpredictable behavior, and the possibility of anarchic spectacle always looms.

**UNION POOL**
484 Union Ave., Brooklyn (718-609-0484)—April 3: The **Zizek Club** tour (see Santos Party House).

**WEBSTER HALL**
125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—April 2: **Balkan Beat Box,** the world-wandering electronic-music ensemble created by the saxophonist Ori Kaplan and the drummer and producer Tamir Muskat. April 7-8: The former Soundgarden and Audioslave front man **Chris Cornell** loves to upset the apple cart. His rock-addled fan base may yearn for the days when he was an elastic grunge vocalist, but his latest album, "Scream," finds him collaborating with the revered hip-hop producer Timbaland. Cornell's feral bray is now paired with hiccupy beats and sleek production, for better or worse.

**WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE**
April 4: The Marseilles-based vocal-and-percussion group **Lo Còr de la Plana,** who sing in Occitan. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information, call 212-545-7536.)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

**ALGONQUIN HOTEL**
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Through April 11: The cabaret mainstay **KT Sullivan.**

**BIRDLAND**
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—March 31-April 4: The cabaret-jazz vocalist **Jessica Molaskey** and her guitarist husband, **John Pizzarelli,** deliver classic and contemporary tunes with aplomb.

**BLUE NOTE**
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—March 31-April 5: The **Preservation Hall Jazz Band,** a New Orleans institution, now features a whole new generation of committed players.

**CAFÉ CARLYLE**
Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—March 31-April 15: The vocalist **Kelli O'Hara,** who is on maternity leave from the Broadway production of "South Pacific," prepares for motherhood by taking to the small stage.

**DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA**
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—March 31-April 5: Two linchpins of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, **Victor Goines,** on saxophone and clarinet, and **Wycliffe Gordon,** on trombone and vocals, pay tribute to Louis Armstrong.

**IRIDIUM**
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—April 2-5: **Bill Evans Soulgrass Special Edition,** an audacious jazz-bluegrass fusion ensemble, features the saxophonist with the multi-instrumentalist **Sam Bush,** one of the leading lights of contemporary bluegrass, the bassist **Richard Bona,** and the drummer **Dennis Chambers.**

**JAZZ STANDARD**
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—April 1-2: The saxophonist **Ted Nash** and his adventurous quintet Odeon, which includes a violinist, an accordionist, and a tuba player. April 3-5: The Brazilian guitarist and singer **Vinicius Cantuária** started his career in the late sixties, as a drummer for the rock band O'Terço, and went on to write hits for the likes of Caetano Veloso and Gal Costa. Since the mid-nineties, he has lived in New York, where he has polished his own contemporary take on bossa nova.

**SMALLS**
183 W. 10th St. (212-252-5091)—April 7: The pianist **John Bunch** and the bassist **Jay Leonhart** are often joined in a musical troika by another mainstream luminary, Bucky Pizzarelli; here, the guitar will be handled by the adroit **Frank Vignola.** April 1: **Ehud Asherie,** a master of swing and stride piano, performs off-the-cuff duets with the saxophonist **Harry Allen.** Later that night, bebop piano from **Tardo Hammer** and his trio.

**VILLAGE VANGUARD**
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—March 31-April 5: One of the great originals of modern jazz history, the saxophonist **Lee Konitz,** who is in his eighties, continues to hone his improvisational stylings. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

## ART
## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

**METROPOLITAN MUSEUM**
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Cast in Bronze: French Sculpture from Renaissance to Revolution."** Through May 24. ♦ **"Raphael to Renoir: Drawings from the Collection of Jean Bonna."** Through April 26. ♦ **"Art of the Korean Renaissance, 1400-1600."** Through June 21. ♦ **"Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors."** Through April 19. ♦ **"Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard."** Through May 25. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

**MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective."** Through May 11. ♦ **"Performance 1: Tehching Hsieh."** Through May 18. ♦ **"Words in Freedom: Futurism at 100."** Through April 6. ♦ **"a shimmer of possibility: Photographs by Paul Graham."** Through May 18. ♦ **"Projects 89: Klara Liden."** Through June 8. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

**GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM**
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989."** Through April 19. ♦ **"The 2008 Hugo Boss Prize: Emily Jacir."** Through April 15. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

**WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART**
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—**"Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect."** Through May 31. ♦ **"Elad Lassry: Three Films."** Through April 30. ♦ **"Sites."** Through May 3. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

**BROOKLYN MUSEUM**
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection."** Through April 5. ♦ **"Unearthing the**

GIBB SLIFE

**Truth: Egypt's Pagan and Coptic Sculpture."** Through May 10. ♦ **"Hernan Bas: Works from the Rubell Family Collection."** Through May 24. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

**AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Climate Change: The Threat to Life and a New Energy Future."** Through Aug. 16. ♦ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter."** Through May 25. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

**ASIA SOCIETY**
Park Ave. at 70th St. (212-288-6400)—**"Yang Fudong: Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest."** The Beijing-born, Shanghai-based artist's visually stunning black-and-white film installation (in Mandarin, with subtitles) updates the third-century Taoist legend of the Seven Sages, a gang of philosophers, poets, and musicians (co-ed, in Yang's version) who fled life at court in favor of bucolic meditation and heavy drinking. In five separate rooms, each outfitted with a few chairs, the action moves from the countryside (where the characters are introduced in the nude) to the city (where they brawl at a Fellini-esque bacchanal). Yang trained as a painter—shots of mountains shrouded in mist inevitably recall scroll paintings—and taught himself how to make films, clearly under the influence of the French New Wave, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, and Bela Tarr, among others. Narrative takes a back seat to mood, and this is just as well—at two hundred and eighty-eight minutes, only diehard cinephiles are likely to sit through the whole thing. Through Sept. 13. (Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Friday evenings until 9.)

**COOPER-HEWITT, NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM**
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Fashioning Felt."** Through Sept. 7. ♦ **"Shazia Sikander Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection."** Through Sept. 7. (Open Mondays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

**FRICK COLLECTION**
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Masterpieces of European Painting from the Norton Simon Museum."** Through May 10. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

**JAPAN SOCIETY**
333 E. 47th St. (212-752-3015)—**"KRAZY! The Delirious World of Anime + Manga + Video Games."** This show is tamer than "Little Boy," Takashi Murakami's terrific curatorial outing here four years ago, but it covers similar ground. Or so it seems in this condensed version of "KRAZY!," which, when it appeared at the Vancouver Art Gallery, included Western cartoons (from Krazy Kat to Chris Ware) and comic-inflected art (Roy Lichtenstein, Raymond Pettibon). Everything here, however, was made in Japan. First come original black-and-white drawings by manga superstars, including a shelving unit with hundreds of perusable editions. Next is a room outfitted with classic video games. Last is an "anime garden," where simultaneous clips of cult classics like "Akira" and "Paprika" run on a seventy-five-foot-long screen. Visitors may conclude that, as "Little Boy" proposed, the glamorized violence and escapist fantasies can be seen as a response to the horrors of the Second World War. But whether this is by curatorial design or simply by default remains unclear. Through June 14. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 to 6, Fridays, 11 to 9, and weekends, 11 to 5.)

**JEWISH MUSEUM**
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—**"Reclaimed: Paintings from the Collection of Jacques Goudstikker."** Through Aug. 2. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45, and Thursdays, 11 to 8.)

*Mandance Project performs "The Spaghetti Ballet," at the Joyce.*

PASCAL BLANCHET

**NEUE GALERIE**
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913."** Through June 29. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

**QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART**
Flushing Meadows-Corona Park (718-592-9700)—**"Queens International 4."** Joseph Beuys coined the phrase "social sculpture," and Nicolas Bourriaud developed the theory of relational aesthetics. Whatever the terms, viewers' involvement is central to this show of work made in Queens. Derick Melander's installation doubles as a community clothing drive; Heidi Boisvert developed a video game to raise awareness about human trafficking; Las Hermanas Iglesias designed a disco floor with a soundtrack that talks dancers through steps that are a mashup of merengue and polka. Nonparticipatory standouts include Sin-ying Ho's porcelain sculptures decorated with images of Mao and Bruce Lee, Amy Yoe's meditative architectural animation, and Okamoto Studio's ice Buddha (displayed in a refrigerated unit), which is replaced when it melts—a reminder that change is inevitable. Through April 26. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 5.)

**STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM**
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Kalup Linzy: If It Don't Fit."** Opens April 2. ♦ **"Propositions on the Permanent Collection."** Opens April 2. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

**JANE FREILICHER**
Joyce Carol Oates once quipped that it was ironic that she was considered prolific, since she spends most of her time looking out the window. The same could be said of Freilicher, who paints serenely spectacular views—often as backdrops for floral still-lifes—from her Greenwich Village apartment and her studio in Water Mill. This survey of nineteen delights, the earliest made in 1963, reveals a realist painter's realist painter (note the winking references to Titian and Watteau). The lavender-gray "Window," finished earlier this year, evokes another master of modest transcendentalism, Morandi, as the buildings of lower Manhattan morph into a shimmering cluster of boxes. Through April 18. (De Nagy, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-262-5050.)

**MATTHEW PILLSBURY**
Pillsbury's photographs of Paris were made in a style that has become his signature: he sets up the camera and keeps its lens open for minutes or even hours. The long exposures capture some of the city's great landmarks of culture and commerce, from the Palais Garnier to Le Bon Marché. Because only stationary objects, like buildings, register over an extended period of time, human figures tend to evaporate or turn ghostly, as in the image of milling wraiths before the Mona Lisa. The technique doesn't always yield exciting results when applied to grand interiors, but Pillsbury's best pictures evoke the aura of crowds long gone—all the spirits that have ever occupied the space. Through April 18. (French Institute, 22 E. 60th St. 212-355-6100.)

### *Short List*

**JAMES CASTLE:** Knoedler, 19 E. 70th St. 212-794-0550. Through April 25. **TACITA DEAN:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Opens April 2. **PAUL GRAHAM:** Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-445-0444. Through May 2. **BARBARA KRUGER:** Skarstedt, 20 E. 79th St. 212-737-2060. Through April 18. **FRANZ WEST:** Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677. Through April 25.

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

**ANDREAS GEFELLER**
Gefeller creates enormous, engrossing color photographs by digitally stitching together thousands of much smaller pictures—shot from just above ground level—like pieces in a quilt. The low perspective results in incredibly detailed views of a well-trod stretch of sand and of graffiti on a roof, but everything above knee level disappears: a ginkgo tree is nothing but its golden halo of fallen leaves. The mostly empty studios at Düsseldorf's Academy of the Arts become Ryman-like abstractions with occasional dollops of trash—a picture of the entire structure is an insanely compact tour de force. Through May 16. (Hasted Hunt, 529 W. 20th St. 212-627-0006.)

**IZIMA KAORU**
There has always been an uneasy balance between attraction and repulsion in Kaoru's big color photographs of beautiful women playing dead in designer clothes. For an ongoing project he calls "Landscapes with a Corpse," Kaoru asks well-known Japanese models and actresses to picture themselves dead, then stages the moment and photographs it from far away and up close. Each "dead" woman is seen from three or four angles, in grouped images that combine cinematic montage and slick, sick fashion shoot (with gowns by Jil Sander, Alexander McQueen, and Jean Paul Gaultier). The absence of blood or apparent trauma in the three new sequences here allows us to imagine that the subjects rest in peace, despite the morbid premise. Through April 25. (Von Lintel, 555 W. 25th St. 212-242-0599.)

### *Short List*

**DAN FLAVIN / CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD / DEREK JARMAN / MIKA TAJIMA:** X, 548 W. 22nd St. 917-697-4886. Through May 29. **THOMAS HIRSCHHORN:** Gladstone, 530 W. 21st St. 212-206-7606. Through April 11. **PAUL RAMIREZ**

**JONAS:** Gray, 526 W. 26th St. 212-399-2636. Opens April 1. **PICASSO:** Gagosian, 522 W. 21st St. 212-741-1717. Through June 6. **STEPHEN PRINA:** Petzel, 537 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467. Through May 2. **DANA SCHUTZ:** Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700. Through April 25. **PAUL SHARITS:** Greene Naftali, 526 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770. Through April 11. **SHAZIA SIKANDER:** Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262. Opens April 3. **MICKALENE THOMAS:** Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923. Through May 2. **JONATHAN TORGOVNIK:** Aperture, 547 W. 27th St. 212-505-5555. Through May 7. **RICHARD TUTTLE:** Pace Wildenstein, 534 W. 25th St. 212-421-3292. Through April 25.

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

**"AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL"**
A gallery known for its fashion photography draws on a large inventory to sketch out a more democratic idea of beauty. Starting off with a wide-screen image of Barack Obama onstage at the Democratic Convention, the exhibition rounds up a stellar cast of subjects (Brando, Sinatra, Madonna, Muhammad Ali, J.F.K. and Jackie) and a broad range of artists (Berenice Abbott, Herb Ritts, Phil Stern, Andre de Dienes). The mood is upbeat and celebratory, with an emphasis on pop culture—Coke, Pepsi, Elvis, the Knicks—and classic landscapes. If anyone steals the show, it's Kurt Markus, whose six photographs (many of cowboys) are quietly, unfailingly artful. Through May 9. (Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway, at Prince St. 212-966-6223.)

**"REGIFT"**
Curated by John Miller, an artist best known for cracking scatological jokes, this show about gift economies has its fair share of visual gags. The best is John Waters's photograph of a "Loser Gift Basket," complete with a Yanni CD, hemorrhoid cream, and a gift certificate to the Betty Ford Center. A more elegiac—and predictable—inclusion is Felix Gonzalez-Torres's now classic installation of wrapped candy that's free for the taking. Sam Durant's sculpture about U.S. Army blankets infected with smallpox which were given to American Indians and Mai-Thu Perret's facsimile of a cake baked to commemorate atomic-bomb tests in the Bikini Atoll sound a more sinister note. Through April 4. (Swiss Institute, 495 Broadway, at Broome St. 212-925-2035.)

### *Short List*

**LAURIE ANDERSON:** Location One, 26 Greene St. 212-334-3347. Through May 2. **FIA BACKSTRÖM / MARIO GARCIA TORRES / STEPHEN KALTENBACH:** Hanley, 136 Watts St. 646-918-6824. Through April 18. **JOSH BLACKWELL:** Uffner, 47 Orchard St. 212-274-0064. Through May 3. **ALEX FLEMING:** Cooley, 34 Orchard St. 212-680-0564. Through April 12. **PAUL GRAHAM:** Salon 94 Freemans, 1 Freeman Alley. 646-672-9212. Through April 18. **JON KESSLER:** Deitch Projects, 76 Grand St. 212-343-7300. Through April 4. **SUZANNE MCCLELLAND:** Scott, 1 Rivington St. 212-358-8767. Through April 18.

## DANCE

**MANDANCE PROJECT**
For Mandance's season at the Joyce, Eliot Feld has created an ensemble piece using Ennio Morricone spaghetti-Western tunes ("The Spaghetti Ballet") for Ha-Chi Yu, a former student from Feld's Ballet Tech school. On April 1-2, Wu-Kang Chen's Taiwan-based company, Horse, will perform "Bones." (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Mandance Project: March 31 at 7:30, April 3-4 at 8, and April 5 at 2 and 7:30. Horse: April 1 at 7:30 and April 2 at 8.)

**NOÉMIE LAFRANCE**
In "Home," a new solo work by the site-specific choreographer Lafrance, the site—and the subject—is the dancer's body, with its curves, angles, and capacity for movement. The performance location will be revealed on the ticket, which can be purchased online, at www.sensproduction.org, or by calling 718-302-5024. (Williamsburg, Brooklyn. April 1-5 at 7:30 and 9:30. Through April 12.)

**KEITH HENNESSY / MELANIE MAAR**
Dance Theatre Workshop presents a double bill. From San Francisco comes the political provocateur Keith Hennessy, with "Crotch (All the Joseph Beuys References in the World . . .)," a solo aesthetic manifesto. From Vienna by way of Brooklyn comes Melanie Maar, with "Phenomenal Bodies," a meditative dance that fully incorporates her collaborator, the guitarist Kenta Nagai. (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 2-4 at 7:30.)

**WORK & SHOW FESTIVAL**
On April 2-4, dre.dance—directed by Andrew Palermo and Taye Diggs—will offer "beyond.words," an exploration of autism. On April 5-6, a double bill features the downtowners Ellis Wood and Edisa Weeks, who has created a piece inspired by both the story of the Elephant Man and "Dumbo." (Tribeca Performing Arts Center, 199 Chambers St. 212-220-1460. April 2-6 at 8.)

**VICKY SHICK / "GLIMPSE"**
A downtown fixture for more than three decades, Shick is a master of the gentle miniature. Steps are small in scale, both introspective and playful; repetition and everyday movement abound. "Glimpse" was made in New York and Budapest, using American and Hungarian dancers, and is tinged with a vaguely Eastern European melancholia. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. April 2-4 at 8:30.)

**KEIGWIN KABARET**
Larry Keigwin's smartly produced cabaret evenings cheekily combine contemporary dance and burlesque. This year's theme, "Up, Up, and Away," finds Keigwin and his crew in retro flight-attendant garb, with performances by Bradford Scobie, Launch Movement Experiment, and the ubiquitous Murray Hill. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. April 2-4 at 8:30. Through April 18.)

**LA FAMIGLIA DIMITRI**
The New Victory presents a troupe of Italo-Swiss circus artists. (209 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. April 3 at 7, April 4 at 2 and 7, and April 5 at noon and 5. Through April 19.)

**COLUMBIA BALLET COLLABORATIVE**
Professional ballet dancers often skip college to advance their careers, but some find a way to do both. The C.B.C., which is made up of Columbia and Barnard students, some of whom are also working dancers, has its Miller Theatre début. The program includes a collaboration between the imaginative young ballet-maker Brian Reeder and the modern-dance choreographer Pam Tanowitz ("Two Part Affair") and a duet by Justin Peck, of New York City Ballet. (Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. April 3-4 at 8.)

**INDANCE**
Perhaps it's best to think of this Toronto company's repertoire as deconstructed Indian bharata natyam, minus the Hindu legends and the costumes, plus eclectic touches such as non-Indian music and Bollywood flourishes. The company makes its New York début, at Joyce SoHo. (155 Mercer St. 212-352-3101. April 3-4 at 8 and April 5 at 3.)

**A.B.T. II**
American Ballet Theatre's junior troupe performs a new work by the former Frankfurt Ballet dancer Jodie Gates, as well as Jerome Robbins's frolicsome "Interplay," from 1945, and the pas de deux from "Swan Lake" and "Don Quixote." Keep an eye out for the luminous Sae Eun Park. (Gerald W. Lynch Theatre at John Jay College, Tenth Ave. at 58th St. 212-477-3030, ext. 1168. April 3-4 at 8.)

**JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS SCHOOL SPRING PERFORMANCE**
This annual treat for ballet lovers showcases the talents of the pupils of A.B.T.'s Onassis School, aged twelve to eighteen. A pair of advanced students will present the showstopping pas de deux from the Russian ballet "Flames of Paris" (1932), and mid-level girls will dance the magical "Shades" scene from "La Bayadère." (Gerald W. Lynch Theatre at John Jay College, Tenth Ave. at 58th St. 212-477-3030, ext. 1168. April 5 at 2 and 7:30.)

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
## FOUR PLAY

On a recent night at Weill Recital Hall, the Ebène Quartet, four young string players from France, made an unpromising entrance, looking like classical music's unwanted answer to the Jonas Brothers, but, from the opening bars of Mozart's Divertimento in D (K. 136), their playing was so secure, alive, rich-toned, and profoundly musical that age ceased to be an issue. Brahms's String Quartet in C Minor seethed with drama, not least when the second violinist lost control of his bow and then caught it while the violist held a note longer than usual. Their performance of the Ravel Quartet was a riot of nuance, sometimes raptly lyrical and sometimes swingingly rhythmic. A recent Virgin Classics CD of the Ravel, Debussy, and Fauré quartets shows similar virtues. In a wacky encore, which involved both playing and humming variations on "Some Day My Prince Will Come," the Ebène revealed that they don't take themselves too seriously. They seem bound for greatness all the same.

—*Alex Ross*

KIM DEMARCO

**"JOHN PRINZ AND FRIENDS"**
The former American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet dancer Prinz has gathered a group of friends, from the American ballerina legend Gelsey Kirkland to Ted Thomas and Frances Ortiz. Kirkland and her husband, Michael Chernov, have created two solos for a promising young dancer, Teele Ude, and the City Ballet corps members Rachel Piskin and Ralph Ippolito will dance a pas de deux from Petipa's commedia-dell'arte ballet "Les Millions d'Arlequin." (Ailey Citigroup, 405 W. 55th St. 212-533-7739. April 5 at 7:30.)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### OPERA

**METROPOLITAN OPERA**
Another night at the Met, another Otto Schenk production—such is Peter Gelb's inheritance from his predecessor. Schenk's take on **"Rigoletto"** is almost comically attentive to traditionalist aesthetics, but it certainly has the ingredients to set up a fine night of singing. The promising cast includes Diana Damrau, Tamara Mumford, Joseph Calleja, and, in the title role, Roberto Frontali; Riccardo Frizza conducts. (April 1 and April 4 at 8.) ♦ The combination of a stubbornly inert Zeffirelli production and Pietro Rizzo's foursquare conducting hampers the latest revival of that deathless duo of verismo, **"Cavalleria Rusticana"** and **"Pagliacci."** But, if anyone can bring fire to these works, it is José Cura, who takes the tenor leads of Turiddu and Canio, respectively. Ildikó Komlósi and Alberto Mastromarino join him in the first opera; Nuccia Focile, Mastromarino, and Christopher Maltman (a swaggering Silvio) share the stage in the second. (April 2 and April 7 at 8.) ♦ The final performance of Bellini's **"La Sonnambula,"** featuring Natalie Dessay, Barry Banks, and Michele Pertusi; Evelino Pidò. (April 3 at 8.) ♦ Massimo Giordano takes on the role of Nemorino in the opening performances of **"L'Elisir d'Amore,"** joined by such singers as Angela Gheorghiu (in the role of Adina), Franco Vassallo, and Simone Alaimo; Maurizio Benini. (April 4 at 1.) ♦ The colorful Otto Schenk production of "Der Ring des Nibelungen"—the signature effort of the James Levine era at the Met—has its last go-round this spring, to be replaced by a new Robert Lepage production beginning in 2010. The house is slowly adding each of the titanic operas to the repertory; next comes **"Die Walküre,"** with James Morris, once more in the role of Wotan (which he created for this production), heading a strong ensemble cast that features Waltraud Meier, Iréne Theorin, Yvonne Naef, Johan Botha, and John Tomlinson; Levine himself is in the pit. (April 6 at 6:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

### ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

**NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC**
Charles Dutoit, esteemed for his colorful and energetic performances of traditional Russian repertory, leads the Philharmonic this week; his guest is the magnetic young Georgian violinist Lisa Batiashvili, who joins him in a program featuring Stravinsky's "Dumbarton Oaks" Concerto, Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, and Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. (April 2 at 7:30 and April 3-4 at 8.) ♦ Note: Dutoit conducts the Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky works in a special, intermissionless "rush hour" concert. (April 1 at 6:45.) ♦ Dutoit also conducts the Tchaikovsky in a Saturday-matinée concert that begins with Mozart's Clarinet Quintet (featuring Stanley Drucker). (April 4 at 2.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

**THE ENGLISH CONCERT**
The long-renowned Baroque ensemble, now under the command of Harry Bicket, comes to Zankel Hall to offer not only bedrock instrumental works by Bach (the First Orchestral Suite) and Handel (the Concerto Grosso in A Major, Op. 6, No. 11) but also a bevy of sacred and secular arias by both composers, delivered by the dulcet voice of the countertenor David Daniels. (212-247-7800. April 1 at 7:30.)

**THE ST. MATTHEW PASSION**
Performances of Bach's monumental, tragic work of Christian piety begin this week. April 1 at 8: Kent Tritle and his Choirs and Orchestra of St. Ignatius Loyola will give a robust yet elegant reading in their ornate, capacious church. Frederick Urrey is the Evangelist; Kevin Deas sings the role of Christ. (Park Ave. at 84th St. 212-288-2520.) ♦ April 3 at 7:30: Talk about connections—John Scott, who was the organist and choirmaster at St. Paul's Cathedral in London before he was tapped for the St. Thomas Church position, invites members of the English Concert, in town for an appearance at Zankel Hall, to perform the Passion with the St. Thomas Choir of men and boys and the ensemble Concert Royal. (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. www.saintthomaschurch.org.)

**ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**
The ever-surprising David Robertson brings his gleaming ensemble to Carnegie Hall. April 3 at 8:30: A humorous concert that begins with Mozart's "Musical Joke" quickly moves into more subversive terrain—the overture to Hindemith's opera "News of the Day," HK Gruber's "Frankenstein!!" (a "pandemonium" for orchestra and "chansonnier," which in this case will be the composer himself), and, at the core, a showing of René Clair's 1924 film "Entr'acte," accompanied by Erik Satie's surreal proto-minimalist score. ♦ April 4 at 8: Another bold program mixes modern and classic works from Nordic lands—the "Good Friday Spell," from Wagner's "Parsifal," and Sibelius's vocal tone poem "Luonnotar" (with the soprano Karita Mattila) and the Fifth Symphony, punctuated by Bernd Alois Zimmermann's "Canto di Speranza" and the New York première of Kaija Saariaho's "Mirage for Soprano, Cello, and Orchestra" (with Mattila joined by the cellist Anssi Karttunen). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)

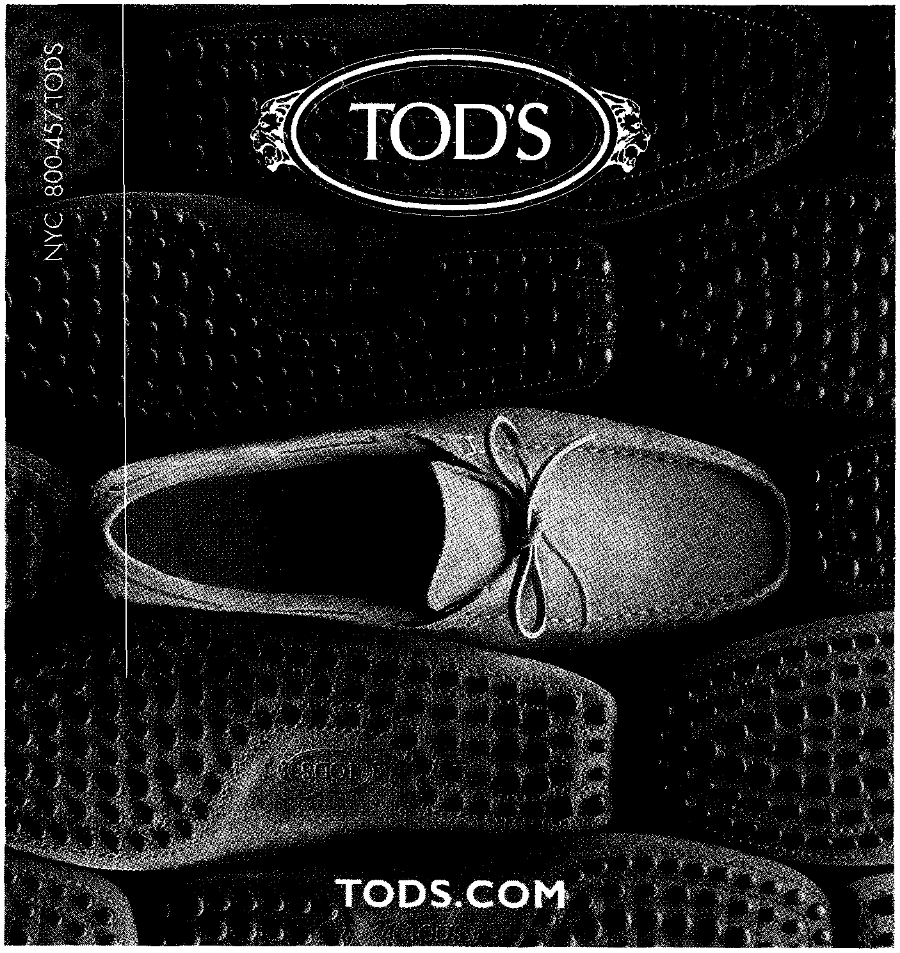
**ANDRÉ PREVIN AND THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA**
André Previn is eighty this year, and Carnegie Hall can't get enough of him; one of several events in his honor is a concert with Philly's sumptuous band. He conducts Mozart's grand Piano Concerto No. 24 in C Minor from the keyboard, mounting the podium after intermission to lead Strauss's "Symphonia Domestica." (212-247-7800. April 7 at 8.)

### RECITALS

**MATA FESTIVAL**
Once a glimmer in Philip Glass's gimlet eye, the festival, now in its second decade, has become a bright showcase for talented young composers. The series concludes this week at (Le) Poisson Rouge; the performers include Ne(x)tworks, the Now Ensemble, and So Percussion, offering music by such composers as Missy Mazzoli, Cenk Ergün, and Cornelius Dufallo. (158 Bleecker St. April 1 and April 3-4 at 7:30. For complete listing and ticket information, see www.lepoissonrouge.com.)

**BARGEMUSIC**
It was the violinist Olga Bloom who, some three decades ago, had the crazy but wonderful idea to turn an abandoned coffee barge into a warm and intimate venue for chamber music. To celebrate Bloom's ninetieth birthday, the violinist Mark Peskanov and a formidable assemblage of string quartets—including the Shanghai, St. Petersburg, and Flux Quartets—will perform a four-hour marathon concert featuring music by Beethoven, Brahms, Shostakovich, Mendelssohn (the Octet), and Bach. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083. April 2 at 6. For full schedule, see www.bargemusic.org.)

**INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ENSEMBLE: "EIGHT SONGS FOR A MAD KING"**
In the past two decades, Peter Maxwell Davies's music, like that of most composers, has reached



toward accessibility. But this stunning chamber-opera-cum-spectacle, based on quotes by the older, deranged King George III, was the acme of late-nineteen-sixties expressionism. The excellent, risk-taking Chicago-New York group gives it the full multimedia treatment at (Le) Poisson Rouge. (158 Bleecker St. www.lepoissonrouge.com. April 2 at 7:30.)

**MUSIC AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM: KATE LINDSEY AND KEN NODA**
The rich-toned mezzo-soprano, off to a great start at the Metropolitan Opera, appears in recital with the company's admired house pianist, with a program featuring music by Rossini, Debussy ("Fêtes Galantes II"), Schoenberg (the "Cabaret Songs"), Berlioz, and Brahms. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. April 3 at 7.)

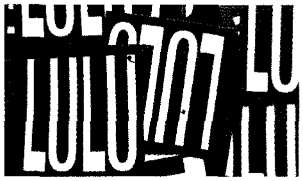
**KLANGFORUM WIEN: "FREE RADICALS"**
Music is not enough for the way-out Viennese new-music band: their concert at Alice Tully Hall features perpetually provocative music by Schoenberg, Stockhausen, Feldman (the entrancing "Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety"), and Harrison Birtwistle, along with short films by such auteurs as Man Ray, Maya Deren, and Tim MacMillan. (212-721-6500. April 4 at 8.)

**MUSIC AT THE FRICK COLLECTION: BYRON SCHENKMAN**
Already well known as a harpsichordist, the former director of the Seattle Baroque Orchestra makes his New York recital début on a modern piano, in a tribute to this year's most prominent anniversary composers: Haydn (three sonatas) and Mendelssohn (including the Rondo Capriccioso in E Major and the Fantasy in F-Sharp Minor). (1 E. 70th St. 212-547-0715. April 5 at 5.)

**KEYS TO THE FUTURE: "SPOTLIGHT ON MINIMALISM"**
A passel of New York's finest new-music pianists—including Stephen Gosling, Lisa Moore, and Joseph Rubenstein—gather at (Le) Poisson Rouge to perform classics and new entries in the minimalist repertory, by such composers as John Adams ("Hallelujah Junction"), David Lang, Nico Muhly, and Steve Reich ("Piano Phase"). (158 Bleecker St. www.lepoissonrouge.com. April 5 at 7:30.)

**KRYSTIAN ZIMERMAN**
The magisterial Polish pianist, an artist whose performances combine formidable precision with an air of reticent mystery, comes to Carnegie Hall to offer a recital of works by Bach, Beethoven (the Sonata No. 32 in C Minor), Brahms (the Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119), and Szymanowski. (212-247-7800. April 6 at 8.)

## TABLES FOR TWO
## LULU



235 Mulberry St., near Spring St. (212-966-6616)—On a recent evening at this narrow, dimly lit restaurant, where the bar was more crowded than the dining area, a pair of young women discussed seasonal cupcakes: "I mean, summer is really for stone fruit." The bartender gave away free shots of watermelon kamikazes and served up pun-happy cocktails—Thyme for Pearadise, Tequila Mockingbird (a pungent combination of pineapple, cardamom, and chile). Two dapper men in three-piece suits with matching pocket squares raised their glasses to a young lady, who struggled to remember the relevant Italian: "*Saluche?*" The manager greeted guests by name, slung his arms around shoulders, kissed cheeks. It was louche and loose and lots of fun.

Once you're seated, in one of the two-person booths by the bar or back in the dining room (which feels vaguely illicit, thanks to diaphanous red curtains), the evening proceeds with a pleasant insouciance. "So we've got great Belgian beers, blah, blah, blah," a waiter, trilby perched on the back of his head, said. "If you have any questions, don't ask me. I don't know anything about it." Luckily, the menu is pretty straightforward: French, with a nod to American comfort food. Risotto fritters arrived stacked in a pyramid, crispy on the outside, a little gummy inside; their only real failing was a cold tomato sauce. Sautéed wild mushrooms, fragrantly woodsy, in a heap atop a slice of brioche, were flawless. The salmon tartare was a bit bland until tasted in the same bite as the salty, scallion-flecked mini-latkes that accompanied it. With the entrées, it seemed that the simple—black linguine with roasted-tomato sauce, a nicely cooked burger—trumped the complex. "Pekin" duck, for instance, didn't pay off: the fowl was a little pasty, the sweet potatoes too sweet, the mushrooms tacked on. But an almost clichéd entrée of braised short ribs—tender meat straddling a creamy white puddle of mashed potatoes and a dark-green mass of Swiss chard—was fantastic, and appeared, according to an informal poll, to be the regulars' favorite. When a diner couldn't quite clean his plate, he let the waiter know that it was only because of the limits of his appetite, not the quality of the food. "You don't have to tell me," the waiter replied. "I know it's good." (Open daily for dinner. Entrées $13-$22.)

—*Andrea Thompson*

## MOVIES OPENING

**ADVENTURELAND**
A comedy, directed by Greg Mottola, set in 1987, about a teen-ager who takes a job at an amusement park. Starring Jesse Eisenberg and Ryan Reynolds. Opening April 3. (In wide release.)

**ALIEN TRESPASS**
A retro science-fiction movie, about an alien who saves Earth from a monster. Directed by R. W. Goodwin. Opening April 3. (In limited release.)

**ENLIGHTEN UP!**
Kate Churchill directed this documentary, about a skeptical journalist who tries yoga. Opening April 1. (IFC Center.)

**THE ESCAPIST**
A drama, directed by Rupert Wyatt, about a convict who tries to break out of jail in order to visit his ailing daughter. Opening April 3. (IFC Center.)

**FAST & FURIOUS**
Vin Diesel and Paul Walker star in this action sequel, as a fugitive and a police officer who unite to fight a common enemy. Opening April 3. (In wide release.)

**FORBIDDEN LIE$**
A docudrama, directed by Anna Broinowski, about the hoax behind a book about honor killings in Jordan. Opening April 3. (Cinema Village.)

**GIGANTIC**
Matt Aselton directed this comedy, about a bed salesman (Paul Dano) who falls in love with a customer (Zooey Deschanel). Opening April 3. (Village East Cinemas.)

**PARIS 36**
A musical drama, directed by Christophe Barratier, about three music-hall performers in France in the nineteen-thirties. In French. Opening April 3. (Paris and Union Square.)

**THE SONG OF SPARROWS**
In this comic drama, directed by Majid Majidi, a girl in rural Iran loses her hearing aid shortly before her school exams. In Farsi. Opening April 3. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

**SUGAR**
Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck directed this drama, about an aspiring teen-age baseball player from the Dominican Republic who joins an American minor-league team. In Spanish and English. Opening April 3. (In limited release.)

**TULPAN**
Sergei Dvortsevoy directed this romantic comedy, about a young man who returns home to rural Kazakhstan in search of a bride. In Kazakh and Russian. Opening April 1. (Film Forum.)

## NOW PLAYING

**ALEXANDER THE LAST**
The latest film from the mumblecore (i.e., micro-budget) writer-director Joe Swanberg arrays the usual mumblecore obsession (romantic relationships among a small group of semi-articulate people) around a local theatre production. A married actress (Jess Weixler) contemplates an affair with a good-looking actor she's working with (Barlow Jacobs), only to discover that her sister (Amy Seimetz), with whom she's very close, is sleeping with him. In the past, Swanberg relied on a slapdash collage method of storytelling, with many relationships left hanging, to express a cool contempt for routine commercial filmmaking, but in this movie he's advancing toward a firmer structure and more emotionally explicit scenes. In its formal symmetries, the story suggests a stuttering version of one of Éric Rohmer's narratives of advance and retreat in "Six Moral Tales." Yet mumblecore's pleasures still lie in the sparks the actors strike in one another. Many of them suggested or added material to Swanberg's idea; the scenes are semi-improvised. With Justin Rice.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 3/16/09.) (IFC video on demand.)

**DUPLICITY**
The writer-director Tony Gilroy at play. In the first scene of this combined romantic comedy and caper movie, Claire Stenwick (Julia Roberts), a C.I.A. operative, and Ray Koval (Clive Owen), an MI6 agent, meet at a sunny garden party at the American Embassy in Dubai, and we immediately know we're in fast company—the stars' bantering rhythm is so natural and easy that it's already an early stage of sex. Claire and Ray then leave national service, join rival cosmetic firms, and try to steal the formula for an important new product. The sardonic joke animating "Duplicity" is that corporate espionage is now carried out with the same complex scams, ploys, and thefts that rival intelligence services used at the height of the Cold War. Gilroy is conning us, too, with a series of flashbacks to different places (including a beautiful stretch of Rome's old city), in which Ray and Claire meet and conduct variations on the same conversation again and again. Are they really working together? The characters lie, test, probe, reverse themselves, fall into bed and out of it. The trickiness may add little of substance, but the stars' alertness to each other's moods is charming and often richly funny and sexy. With Paul Giamatti and Tom Wilkinson, as rival megalomaniac C.E.O.s. Edited by John Gilroy.—*D.D.* (3/30/09) (In wide release.)

**THE GREAT BUCK HOWARD**
A strange, stodgy throwback of a picture—reflecting, perhaps, its principal character, who is a throwback himself. For years, Buck Howard (John Malkovich) has worked as a stage mentalist, crossing the country and reading the minds of its citizens. He used to be a regular on the "Tonight Show," with Johnny Carson, but that was ages ago; now he plays to older audiences in smaller towns. He takes on a new assistant, in the shape of Troy (Colin Hanks)—a pleasant fellow, who keeps telling us (in a superfluous voice-over) how life-changing the experience has been, although he seems no less dull at the end of it than he did at the start.

JESSIE WENDER

The director is Sean McGinly, who directs as if he himself were Troy, barely roused by the magic of the maestro. In more encouraging hands, Malkovich might have turned on the menace, but he seems only half-engaged by the tale, as does the rest of a surprisingly strong cast—Steve Zahn, Griffin Dunne, Ricky Jay, and Tom Hanks, who plays Troy's disapproving dad. The whole thing is shaken awake for a while by the earthy Emily Blunt, before drifting back to sleep.—*Anthony Lane* (3/23/09) (In wide release.)

**HAMILTON**

A minor miracle. Matthew Porterfield's first film, from 2006, barely an hour long and made in 16-mm. for a pittance in his native Baltimore with nonprofessional actors, is one of the most original, moving, and accomplished American independent films in recent years. The story is touchingly simple—a teen-age mother, about to leave town for a month, wants her baby's young father to pay her a visit—and Porterfield's genius is in the way he brings it to life. Exquisitely composed, unfolding gradually, suffused with light and color, his tender yet unsentimental images convey the graceful rhythms and quiet sorrows of young lives on hold. Porterfield is a master of time: here, an eight-minute trip takes eight minutes, but its progress is rich in visual epiphanies. The film builds to an unlikely, wondrous chase, and leaves the viewer astonished, hungry for more, and eagerly anticipating Porterfield's next film.—*Richard Brody* (UnionDocs; April 4.)

**HUNGER**

The British video artist Steve McQueen has re-created the famous 1981 hunger strike staged by I.R.A. warriors, and led by Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender), at Maze prison, in Northern Ireland. The strike, which attracted international attention, resulted in the agonizingly slow death of ten men. The movie is as much religious, even sacerdotal, as it is political in intent. The men smear the walls with excrement, spill the chamber pots under the doors so the urine gathers in the hallways, suffer brutal punishments in reprisal, and prepare themselves for martyrdom. In a powerfully written conversation with Sands, Father Dominic Moran (Liam Cunningham), a tough priest, accuses him of not loving life, of having lost touch with the world and any rational political purpose. He's exactly right, but the movie takes the opposite view, that the men are sainted in their naked anguish. In the end, one is awed but not moved by the film. Sands is a violent man who dies in the service of a dubious cause and on a cross of his own choosing. He's a Christ without humanity, and McQueen's aestheticization of his suffering and death is borderline creepy.—*D.D.* (3/30/09) (In limited release.)

**I LOVE YOU, MAN**

No one would mistake the director John Hamburg for Ingmar Bergman, but his brittle, glossy comedy, despite its intermittently entertaining antics, leaves a long and bitter aftertaste of the haut-bourgeois blues. It stars Paul Rudd as Peter Klaven, a hardworking young Los Angeles real-estate broker who is about to marry. His fiancée, Zooey Rice (Rashida Jones), has a tart-tongued posse of friends to fill out the wedding party, but Peter, for whom love and work are all, has none, and goes on a series of "man dates" to expand his purview. His new buddy, Sydney Fife (Jason Segel), an overgrown adolescent with mysterious resources and seemingly no inner life, pushes into Peter's world and creates problems for the couple. The humor is all verbal—there's little visual and physical invention—but it's clever and sometimes touching, as when Peter repeatedly stumbles over terms of male endearment. Behind the gags, there's a strange current of underlying discord, regarding the isolating comforts of prosperity, the fault lines of friendships, and the murky depths of what passes for love. With Lou Ferrigno as himself.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

**MONSTERS VS. ALIENS**

Reviewed *this week in* The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

**SHALL WE KISS?**

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In limited release.)

ROBERT PIERSANTI

**SIX IN PARIS**

Six short works of comic irony, from 1964, set in a wide range of neighborhoods, from the high-class (La Muette, where Claude Chabrol filmed) to the red-light (the Rue Saint-Denis, Jean-Daniel Pollet's setting). Éric Rohmer's segment, centered on the Place de l'Étoile, brings together two things that catch a stranger's eye—violence and sex. The best of the bunch by far, and indeed one of the greatest short films ever made, is by the ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, who, filming near the Gare du Nord, turns his analytical gaze upon a young working couple whose domestic discontents—over money, sex, table manners, and dreams deferred—break out into marital warfare in the course of one stunningly long take that roams from the kitchen to the bedroom and out the door. It's followed by another sinuous shot, in which the woman storms out into the street and encounters the man of her dreams, who offers her the chance of a lifetime. The challenges that Rouch poses to the run of daily life are downright existential; his small-scale film has the rich social, political, historical, and psychological implications of an epic feature. In French.—*R.B.* (French Institute Alliance Française; April 7.)

**SUNSHINE CLEANING**

As any actor will tell you, goodness, of all the character traits, is one of the hardest to make interesting. The young Amy Adams, with her doll-like appearance—blue eyes, red hair, very pale skin—has what can only be called a gift for portraying generosity, optimism, and cheerfulness. She can make ingenuousness seem noble, by expressing a powerful will to find the best in life. In this Sundance-style independent movie, she plays an overburdened single mother living in Albuquerque. She looks after her kid, her scapegrace younger sister (Emily Blunt), and her affectionate but unsteady father (Alan Arkin), while carrying on a motel-room love affair with a married cop (Steve Zahn). Her school friends have married well, while she and her sister make a living entering shabby houses in which people have been murdered or committed suicide and then cleaning up the remnants of their lives. What draws them to this depressing line of work? That's the movie's mystery, which is only gradually revealed. The writer (Megan Holley) and the director (Christine Jeffs) might have gone farther into danger and emotional loss; at times, "Sunshine Cleaning" borders on mere whimsy. But Adams, forging ahead gamely, keeps it aloft.—*D.D.* (In limited release.)

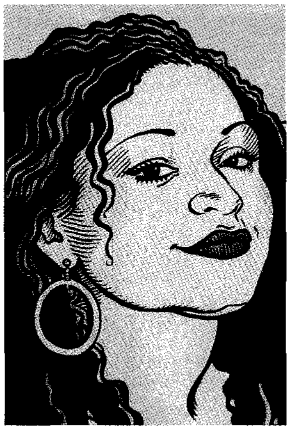
**TOKYO SONATA**

A tale of the times, in which a Japanese businessman (Teruyuki Kagawa) loses his job but finds himself unable to break the bad news to his family. We feel the pressure of things unspoken ripple through his family, wondering what his subservient wife (Kyoko Koizumi) already knows, and how long she will be able to preserve her decorum. As for his sons, the younger (Kai Inowaki) provokes chaos at school and takes piano lessons on the sly, as if they were a crime, while the elder (Yu Koyanagi) does the impossible and joins the American military—a clear case of the director, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, rigging the facts to suit his thematic needs. The story is awkwardly split, opening in tremulous peace and then exploding halfway through into a barrage of hectic incidents—a kidnapping, a theft, a car accident, and an unlikely epiphany by the sea. Kurosawa forgoes credibility, you might say, in favor of doom-mongering; even viewers who don't accept such a deal will be struck by the menacing calm of his compositions, and his unveiling of a life made from lies. In Japanese.—*A.L.* (3/23/09) (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

**TWO LOVERS**

If this really is the swan song of Joaquin Phoenix, as the actor has vowed, then it's a fine-looking swan to go out on. He plays Leonard, who lives in Brighton Beach with his parents, works in the family's dry-cleaning store, and seems not just troubled in mind but, as it were, only half-formed as an adult member of society. Not that this stops him from attracting the attention of beautiful women; first comes Sandra (Vinessa Shaw), the daughter of his parents' friends, followed shortly by Michelle (Gwyneth Paltrow), whose apartment overlooks his own, and who can boast a range of perplexities almost

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
## RISING STAR



Karen Olivo is a thirty-two-year-old Bronx native, who, in a standing-ovation-worthy impersonation as Anita, Maria's older and wiser friend, in the current revival of "West Side Story" (at the Palace), seems to have come out of nowhere. But that's not true. She débuted on Broadway in 1998, in "Rent." Later, she joined the cast of "In the Heights," Lin-Manuel Miranda's queasily overblown ego trip. (Miranda also translated the lyrics for this bilingual version of "West Side Story.") Olivo doesn't make us forget Rita Moreno's Oscar-winning portrayal of Anita, in the 1961 film, so much as give us a different take, one that makes Anita grow. Olivo is not content to play the part as a "spitfire"; her arguments with and love for Maria and Maria's brother, Bernardo, stem from real concern and hurt, which makes Anita not only a very sexy woman but a sad and knowledgeable one as well. In digging deep, Olivo has come up with something fresh. And she's the first woman of color to become a Broadway star on par with Audra McDonald.

—*Hilton Als*

as broad as his, what with her weakness for drugs and her reliance on the wallet of a married man (Elias Koteas). James Gray's film observes Leonard as he seesaws between these two alliances; as late as the final scene, we cannot tell which way he will tip, still less whether his choice will make him happy ever after. The over-all result is a cramped and distressing movie that is somehow eased and opened out by its rich soundtrack and, above all, by the grace of its compositions. With Isabella Rossellini as Leonard's long-suffering mother.—*A.L.* (2/23/09) (In wide release.)

**VALENTINO: THE LAST EMPEROR**
The opulent life style and fabulous haute-couture fashions of the great designer Valentino are presented in all their splendor in this documentary by Matt Tyrnauer. The film covers Valentino's final two years at work before his retirement and the grand forty-fifth-anniversary party, in 2007, celebrating his fashions. The film isn't a biography; Tyrnauer simply follows the designer around and captures the moments. And, between the life beyond luxury (the Roman villa, the French château, the yacht, the skiing in Gstaad) and the workers in his showroom (including his prickly genius seamstress and her assistants, who dress in white when handling the beautiful fabrics), there's plenty to choose from. But the film's main focus is Valentino's forty-five years with his business and life partner, Giancarlo Giammetti, whose attentiveness and devotion to the designer are sincerely moving. It's a stirring relationship, and Tyrnauer's film catches what genuinely feels like the end of an era. By the time we get to the party, for which the Colosseum is bathed in blue light as a backdrop for wire-dancing acrobats dressed in Valentino red, the Felliniesque-ness of it all can bring tears to our eyes.—*Bruce Diones* (Film Forum.)

**WATCHMEN**
The names of many directors, including Terry Gilliam and Paul Greengrass, have been linked with this project over the years. Only now will they realize what a lucky escape they had. The task was to find a way of dramatizing Alan Moore's graphic novel—something of a cult among devotees, which means that, like all cults, it has escaped critical rigor. The helm was finally handed to Zack Snyder, who made the loopy but entertaining "300"; this time, he has conjured a work that forgets to entertain but somehow manages to bore, bewilder, and disgust. We are introduced to a band of former crime busters, now under threat: Nite Owl (Patrick Wilson), the Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), Dr. Manhattan (Billy Crudup), the lithe but witless Silk Spectre (Malin Akerman), a moneyed fop named Ozymandias (Matthew Goode), and, lastly, Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley), who takes time off from merciless slaughter to narrate the proceedings. None of them is striking enough to hold our attention for long; their powers, superpowers, toys, and disguises seem wide-ranging but indeterminate, and any hint of political satire—as intended by the angry Moore—is drowned in a flood of brutal murk. The result takes infinite adolescent pleasure in its own nastiness and gives no pleasure in return. With Carla Gugino, a fine actress who should have stayed away.—*A.L.* (3/9/09) (In wide release.)

**WE LIVE IN PUBLIC**
The filmmaker Ondi Timoner seems destined to have made this documentary, about the profligate and elusive Internet pioneer Josh Harris, because, as her film reveals, she was a participant in some of its most dramatic events. Harris, who was a lonely TV child obsessed with "Gilligan's Island," understood the Web's transformative promise as early as 1980, and, in the nineties, founded Pseudo.com, a New York-based blend of streaming video and original content, where he hired a horde of downtown artists and turned them loose in an environment that one observer likens to Andy Warhol's Factory. The film's turning point comes when he tries to realize his plans for interactive virtual reality in a basement commune—which he compared to a concentration camp—where volunteers would move in and sign themselves over, allowing their every move, including bed and bath activities, to be recorded. Timoner was there, and is captured in Harris's disturbing yet fascinating archival footage. He took the notion a step farther in his next venture, as he wired his home with cameras and mikes, locked himself in with his girlfriend, and interacted online with viewers, who quickly moved from being spectators to being participants in the couple's life. Harris, in Timoner's privileged view, is graced and cursed with a visionary strangeness; artist, con artist, and businessman; genius, clown, and control freak—he nonetheless brought forth dark wonders, which the director thankfully rescues from oblivion.—*R.B.* (MOMA; April 5.)

## *Also Playing*

**GOODBYE SOLO:** Cinemas 1, 2, and 3 and Angelika Film Center. **THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT:** In wide release. **RACE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN:** In wide release.

## REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

*Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.*

**ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES**
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"Essential Cinema." April 4 at 4:30: A program of four short films featuring Laurel and Hardy, including "Them Thar Hills" (1934, Charley Rogers). ♦ April 5 at 4: A program of films by the Lumière brothers.

**BAM ROSE CINEMAS**
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—The films of Nagisa Oshima. All films are in Japanese. April 1 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "The Sun's Burial" (1960). ♦ April 2 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Night and Fog in Japan" (1960). ♦ April 3 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Death by Hanging" (1968). ♦ April 4 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Pleasures of the Flesh" (1965). ♦ April 5 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Boy" (1969). ♦ April 6 at 6 and 9: "The Ceremony" (1971). ♦ April 7 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Three Resurrected Drunkards" (1968).

**FILM FORUM**
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—The films of Jules Dassin. April 1 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30 and April 2 at 2, 4:30, and 9:30: "He Who Must Die" (1958; in French). ♦ April 2 at 7:30: "Brute Force" (1947). ♦ April 3-4 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Rififi" (1955; in French). ♦ April 5 at 1:10, 5:10, and 9:15: "Never on Sunday" (1960; in English, Greek, and Russian). ♦ April 5 at 2:55 and 7: "Topkapi" (1964). ♦ April 6 at 1, 4:30, and 8: "10:30 P.M. Summer" (1966; in English, Spanish, and French). ♦ April 6 at 2:40, 6:10, and 9:45: "The Rehearsal" (1974; in English and Greek). The 6:10 screening will be introduced by Jackie Raynal, the film's assistant editor. ♦ April 7 at 1:20, 5:30, and 9:50: "Phaedra" (1962; in English and Greek). ♦ April 7 at 3:30 and 7:40: "A Dream of Passion" (1978; in English and German).

**FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER**
Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—"Critic's Choice." April 1 at 3: "Metropolitan" (1989, Whit Stillman). ♦ April 2 at 3: "In the Company of Men" (1997, Neil LaBute). ♦ April 3 at 3: "Half Nelson" (2006, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck). ♦ "New Directors/New Films." April 1 at 6:15: "The Shaft" (2008, Zhang Chi; in Mandarin). ♦ April 1 at 9: "9.99" (2008, Tatia Rosenthal). ♦ April 2 at 6:15: "Birdwatchers" (2008, Marco Bechis; in Portuguese and Guarani). ♦ April 2 at 9: "Home" (2008, Ursula Meier; in French). ♦ April 3 at 9: "The Milk of Sorrow" (2008, Claudia Llosa; in Spanish and Quechua). ♦ April 4 at 1:15: "Autumn" (2008, Özcan Alper; in Turkish, Georgian, and Armenian). ♦ April 4 at 4: "Can Go Through Skin" (2009, Esther Rots; in Dutch). ♦ April 4 at 6:30: "Ordinary Boys" (2008, Daniel Hernández; in Arabic). ♦ April 4 at 9: "Give Me Your Hand" (2009, Pascal-Alex Vincent; in French, Spanish, and English). ♦ April 5 at 1:30: "Parque Vía" (2009, Enrique Rivero; in Spanish). ♦ April 5 at 4: "Harmony and Me" (2009, Bob Byington).

**FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE**
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through April 28: "Cinema According to Jackie Raynal." All films are in French. April 7 at 12:30, 4, and 7:30: "La Collectionneuse" (1966, Éric Rohmer) and two short films from the compilation "Six in Paris" (†). The 7:30 screening will be introduced by Raynal and Bruce Goldstein, Film Forum's repertory-program director.

**IFC CENTER**
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"After the Revolution: Cuba on Screen." April 3-5 at 11 A.M.: "Amada" (1983, Nelson Rodríguez and Humberto Solás; in Spanish). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." April 3-4: "Naked Lunch" (1991, David Cronenberg). ♦ "Stranger Than Fiction," a documentary series. April 6 at 8: "Nursery University" (2009, Marc Simon), introduced by the director. ♦ April 7 at 8: "Fallen Champ: The Untold Story of Mike Tyson" (1993, Barbara Kopple), introduced by the director.

**MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"New Directors/New Films." April 1 at 6:15: "The Milk of Sorrow" (2008, Claudia Llosa; in Spanish and Quechua). ♦ April 1 at 9: "Birdwatchers" (2008, Marco Bechis; in Portuguese and Guarani). ♦ April 2 at 6:15: "Autumn" (2008, Özcan Alper; in Turkish, Georgian, and Armenian). ♦ April 2 at 9: "The Shaft" (2008, Zhang Chi; in Mandarin). ♦ April 3 at 6:15: "Harmony and Me" (2009, Bob Byington). ♦ April 3 at 9: "Can Go Through Skin" (2009, Esther Rots; in Dutch). ♦ April 4 at 3:45: "Mid-August Lunch" (2008, Gianni Di Gregorio; in Italian). ♦ April 4 at 6:30: "Home" (2008, Ursula Meier; in French). ♦ April 4 at 9: "Parque Vía" (2009, Enrique Rivero; in Spanish). ♦ April 5 at 1:30: "Ordinary Boys" (2008, Daniel Hernández; in Spanish). ♦ April 5 at 4: "Give Me Your Hand" (2009, Pascal-Alex Vincent; in French, Spanish, and English). ♦ April 5 at 7 and 7:30: "We Live in Public" (†).

**MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE**
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Preview screening. April 6 at 8: "Tyson" (2009, James Toback), introduced by the director. The screening will be held at 34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St., Manhattan.

**RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART**
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." April 3 at 9:30: "Superman" (1978, Richard Donner), introduced by Paul Levitz.

**UNIONDOCS**
322 Union Ave., Brooklyn (718-395-7902)—"Documentary Bodega." April 4 at 8: "Hamilton" (†), followed by a discussion with the director, Matthew Porterfield, moderated by Richard Brody, and a preview of the filmmaker's forthcoming work, "Metal Gods."

**YIVO**
15 W. 16th St. (212-246-6080)—Through April 28: "Picturing the Shoah: Representations of the Holocaust in Cinema." April 1 at 7: "Schindler's List" (1994, Steven Spielberg). ♦ April 5 at 2: "In Praise of Love" (2001, Jean-Luc Godard; in French). ♦ April 5 at 4: "Histoire(s) du Cinema 1A: Toutes les Histoires" (1998, Godard; in French), followed by a discussion with Richard Brody. ♦ April 5 at 6: "Notre Musique" (2004, Godard; in French). ♦ April 7 at 7: "Black Book" (2006, Paul Verhoeven; in Dutch, English, German, and Hebrew), followed by a discussion with the film critic Lisa Schwartzbaum.

## READINGS AND TALKS

**"SELECTED SHORTS"**
Parker Posey, Tim Blake Nelson, and other actors read comic stories by Miranda July, Dorothy Parker, and David Sedaris. (Symphony Space, Broadway at *95th St. 212-864-5400. April 1 at 7.)*

**"SECRET SCIENCE CLUB"**
The Brooklyn-based science-and-pop-culture lecture series has empirical evidence of its popularity: it has moved from the basement of Union Hall to the Bell House, a larger venue. On April 1 at 7:30, the planetary geoscientist James Head talks about

Mars and Antarctica. (149 7th St., between Second and Third Aves., Brooklyn. 718-643-6510.)

### "THE MARRIAGE READING"

A program of nuptial (and divorce) poetry, with Rachel DeWoskin, Major Jackson, Jennifer L. Knox, Ada Limón, Paul Muldoon (the poetry editor of this magazine), Gregory Pardlo, Marie Ponsot, Jason Schneiderman, and Tess Taylor. Champagne and cake will be served. (Bowery Poetry Club, 308 Bowery. April 5 at 6. Tickets at the door.)

### "POEMS & PINTS"

The Poetry Society of America and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's monthly reading series at Fraunces Tavern comes to a close for the season with Sophie Cabot Black and Sharon Olds. (54 Pearl St. For more information, call 212-254-9628. April 7 at 6:30.)

## ABOVE AND BEYOND

### "THE BIG READ"

Henry James's novel "Washington Square" is the subject of the National Endowment for the Arts' latest effort to popularize the reading of literature. The Mercantile Library Center for Fiction, in association with the N.E.A., has organized a monthlong celebration of the author and the work, which is set in New York. A discussion by academics about James and the city, on April 1 at 4, will be followed by a staged reading by the Metropolitan Playhouse, on April 2 at 2 and April 4 at 6, of Ruth and Augustus Goetz's 1947 play, "The Heiress," which is based on the novel. (The April 4 reading will include a post-performance discussion with professors from New York University.) On April 5 at 1:30, Joyce Gold leads a walking tour of James's haunts in Greenwich Village. Kevin Baker, Stefan Merrill Block, Darin Strauss, and Caitlin Macy debate James's merits on April 7 at 7. (For more information, including where each event is taking place, visit www.mercantilelibrary.org. Through April 30.)

### NATIONAL POETRY MONTH

The Academy of American Poets' annual celebration gets under way with "Poetry & the Creative Mind," at Alice Tully Hall, featuring readings by Joan Baez, Roy Blount, Jr., Mia Farrow, Jorie Graham, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Chip Kidd, Wynton Marsalis, Steve Reich, Zadie Smith, Mark Strand, and Harold Varmus. (Broadway at 65th St. 212-721-6500. April 1 at 6:30. For more information about National Poetry Month, visit www.poets.org.)

### MORE POETRY

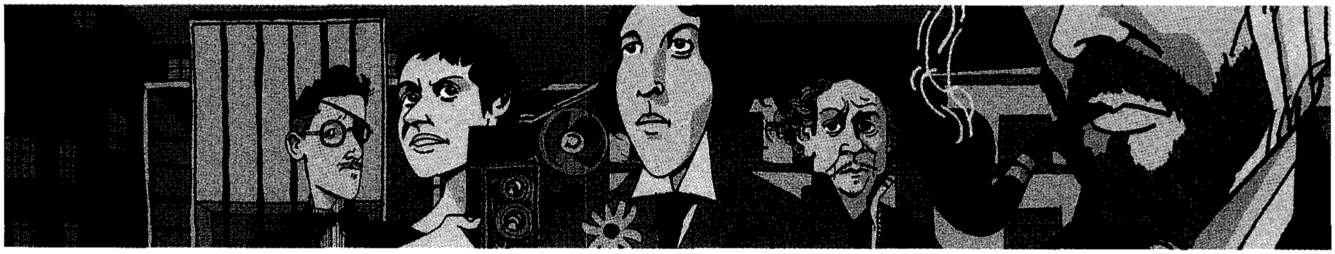
Poets House, which was founded in 1985 by the poet Stanley Kunitz and the arts administrator Elizabeth Kray, is preparing to move to a new home, in Battery Park City, later this year, but that's not delaying its annual showcase of new poetry books. More than two thousand titles will be available for perusing in a fitting temporary location, the Willa Cather Room of the Jefferson Market Library, a space once frequented by the likes of Stephen Crane, E. E. Cummings, and Marianne Moore. (Sixth Ave. at 10th St. April 4-11. For more information, visit www.poetshouse.org.)

### AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The New York Antiquarian Book Fair sets up shop April 3-5 at the Park Avenue Armory, where two hundred dealers will show such tactile treasures as a three-volume edition of Hokusai's "One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji," illustrated in the *sumi* technique (black and gray ink on paper), and a handmade album containing Paul Claudel's illustrated scenario for the avant-garde ballet "L'Homme et Son Désir." (Park Ave. at 67th St. 212-777-5218.) ♦ **Swann's** small, selective "101 Fine Books" sale (April 2) includes Judaica, sumptuously illustrated issues of Aimé Maeght's art journal *Derrière le Miroir* (with lithographs by Chagall), and a miniature edition of Dante's Divine Comedy, just the thing for long subway rides. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.) ♦ After an auction of photographs and photographic editions (April 2), **Bloomsbury** offers a selection of books and manuscripts (April 4), featuring a wealth of medieval texts—including illustrated manuscripts and incunabula—from the collection of Harry Walton, a onetime fellow of the Morgan Library, as well as from a private collection with a focus on illustrations of national costumes. (6 W. 48th St. 212-719-1000.) ♦ **Sotheby's** is hosting a non-selling exhibit of art from the collection of the hedge-fund manager Steven Cohen (April 2-14), who also happens to own a share of the auction house. The show, entitled "Women," is made up of twenty paintings with female subjects, including works by Munch and Richard Prince (such as "Spiritual America," which features a young and very nude Brooke Shields). (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ On April 3, **Christie's** offers musical instruments, including eighteenth-century violins and cellos by Italian masters, as well as a piece of American pop-culture history: a guitar once owned by the beloved cowboy singer Roy Rogers, an OM-45 Deluxe made by C. F. Martin back in 1930. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

## NEWYORKER.COM

Visit the Goings On blog, at www.newyorker.com/go/goingson, for additional cultural coverage and commentary.



*Works by artists including Joyce, Wilde, and van Gogh, at the Morgan.*

JASHAR AWAN

## ON THE HORIZON

### MOVIES
### AFRICAN VOICES
*April 8-14*

In anticipation of the upcoming elections in South Africa, the Film Society of Lincoln Center's African Film Festival will focus on recent events, both political and cultural, in that country. The Egyptian director Jihan El-Tahri's documentary "Behind the Rainbow" looks at the A.N.C.'s transition from a rebel force to a governing power; Ralph Ziman's "Jerusalema" tells the story of a young man from Soweto who turns to crime. (212-875-5610.)

### NIGHT LIFE
### TWISTED
*April 13-14*

The erstwhile punk drummer, indie-rock hero, and alternative-country siren Neko Case swirls into the Nokia Theatre Times Square with songs from her new album, "Middle Cyclone." (800-745-3000.)

### DANCE
### LONG LINES
*April 16-19*

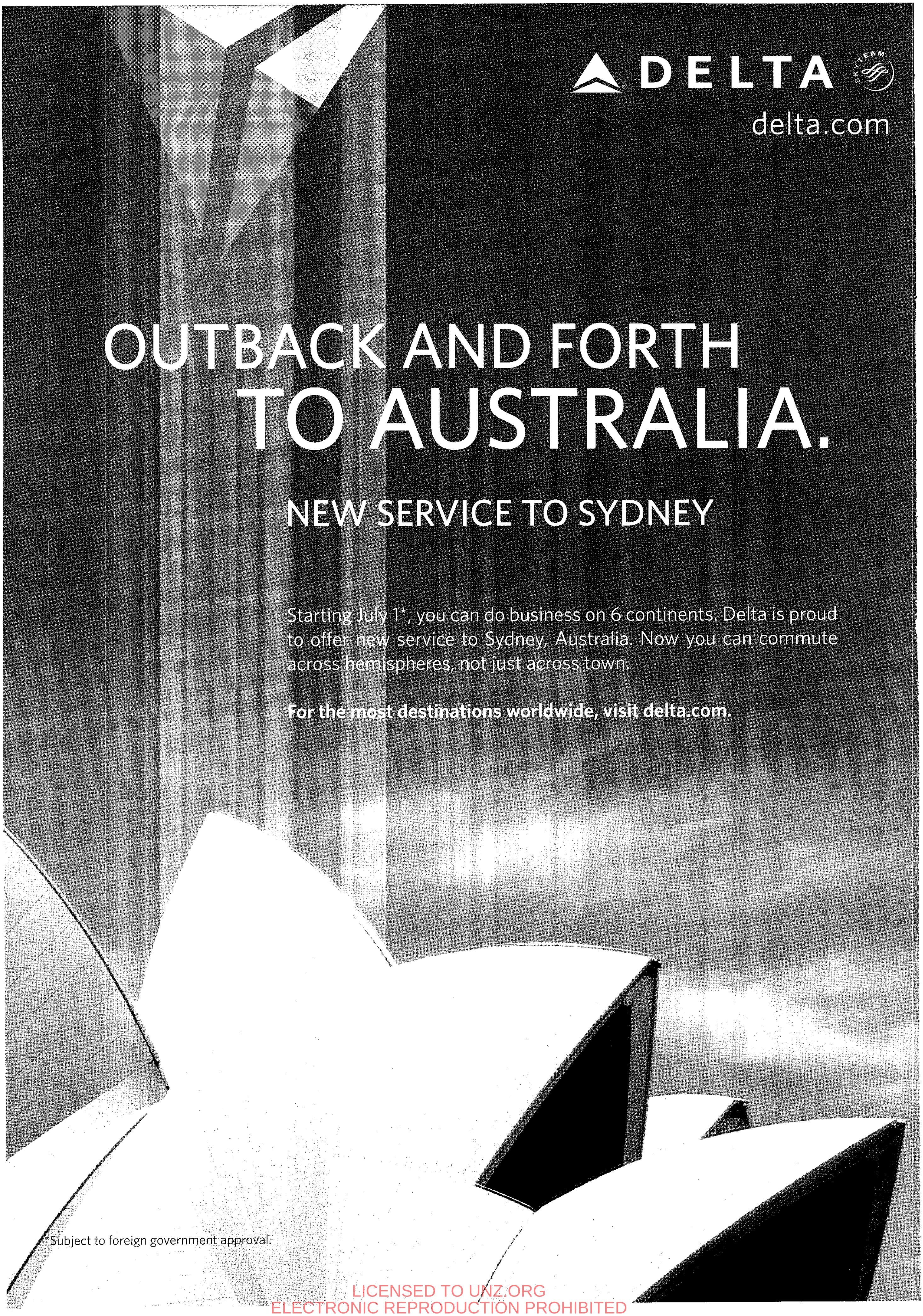
The legendary choreographer Merce Cunningham continues to work out astonishing, novel ways for bodies to move. He celebrates his ninetieth birthday with the première of a new dance at BAM, "Nearly Ninety," joined by the rock group Sonic Youth and Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones. (718-636-4100.)

### ART
### STOCK OF THE NEW
*April 16-Oct. 18*

The Morgan Library & Museum will exhibit a hundred or so recent acquisitions in "New at the Morgan." The eclectic set of works includes sketches by Rembrandt, a Beethoven manuscript, letters by van Gogh and Oscar Wilde, the first publication of James Joyce's "Ulysses," and photographs by Diane Arbus. (212-685-0008.)

### CLASSICAL MUSIC
### SOLID GOLD
*April 23-25*

In a stunning display of programming prowess, Angelika Kirchschlager and René Pape, two of the world's most captivating singers, offer recitals one day apart—with a début by one of the finest young American bass-baritones, Eric Owens, coming in between. (212-247-7800.)



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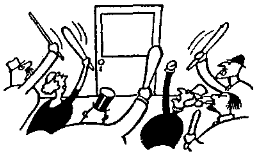
THE NEW YORKER

# THE TALK OF THE TOWN

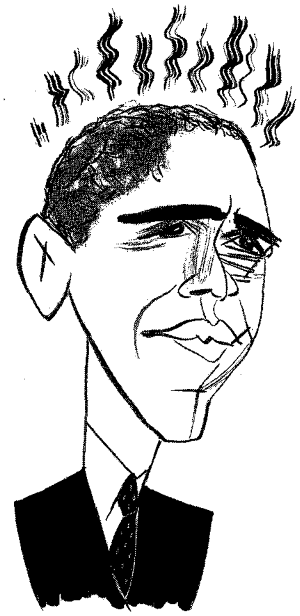
## COMMENT
## MAD AND MADDER



When Barack Obama was running for President, people used to wonder if he appeared so calm because he and his advisers had calculated that the American electorate wouldn't be able to handle an angry black man. Now it's beginning to look as if Obama might actually *be* calm. Certainly his late-breaking claims that he's angry about A.I.G. employees' bonuses—delivered recently inside a garland of good-natured joshing, from Jay Leno's guest chair, and again last week at a press conference whose over-all purpose was to project steadiness—would not have come across as expressions of anger to anybody who happened to be watching with the sound turned off.

American politics is returning to a long-forgotten state of preoccupation with banking. When the financial system was deregulated over the course of the past few decades—with, we now see, disastrous effects—the public didn't even seem to notice. The idea that American politics could be about finance, as it was during the controversies over the Bank of the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century, over the gold standard at the end of it, and over bank and stock-market regulation during the early New Deal, seemed impossibly quaint. That has changed.

It's important to remember, though, that pure populism has never really governed in this country. Franklin Roosevelt adopted ideas that originated in the anger of Americans who had been—no other word for it—screwed by financial manipulators, but politically he had to fend off populists like Huey Long, rather than be a populist himself. Populism is not necessarily liberal, anyway. In Europe, more than here, the recession is already having a political and social effect—protests serious enough to threaten or topple governments have taken place in Greece, Hungary, Latvia, and the Czech Republic. Most of the unrest entails workers contesting job losses and cuts in government benefits, but some, like that in Hungary, has a right-wing, ultranationalist character. In the United States, populism has been associated not just with calls for economic equality but also with nativism and racial violence. That may be one reason that President Obama, to judge by his manner, if not his words, sees the virtues of calm, rather than anger, so clearly.



Obama has to try to guide the country out of the crisis, and rage isn't a policy. (A ninety-per-cent tax rate on the biggest of the A.I.G. bonuses, such as the House passed two weeks ago, when there was far more pressing business to attend to, isn't a policy, either.) It also isn't a politics—not many of the leading avatars of rage are trying to organize it into a coherent response to the financial crisis which might help the tens of millions of ordinary Americans who are in bad trouble right now. Nationalization of the worst off of the big banks—the favorite solution of economists who are one notch to the left of the economists in the Administration—*is* a policy, and one that might plausibly be sold to people who are angry at bankers who continue to make a lot of money through these hard times.

But it isn't difficult to guess why the President chose instead to endorse the new phase of the financial rescue plan that Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner unveiled last week. Obama surely did not decide to run for President because he was burning with a passion to reform the financial system. He has to address

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

the crisis, and he is trying to add enough new controls to the system to prevent a repeat of it, but it looks as if his heart is with the big new programs in his budget and with his foreign-policy initiatives. Bank nationalization would drive the stock market down and increase the agita of people with 401(k) plans. Moderate Democrats in Congress would further soften in their support for the Administration's legislation. The price of bank nationalization might be Obama's super-ambitious plans in other realms, which, if history is a guide, are likely to pass only in this first year of his Presidency. If they do pass, he will have generated tax revenues from affluent people for social purposes far beyond those of the House's tax on A.I.G. bonuses, and he will have significantly eased the distress of people who can't get good health care or education. That is a lot to put at risk.

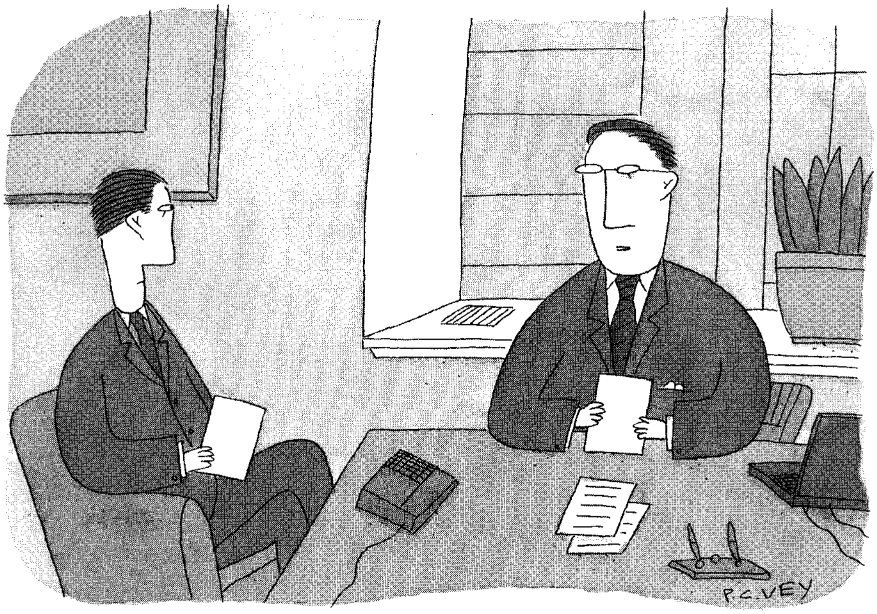
The Administration's new bank-rescue plan did push the markets back up—but it has the potential to generate returns for a fortunate few on a scale that will make the A.I.G. bonuses look like spare change. Its premise is that if the big banks can sell off their bad assets they can function again. That thought has occurred to the banks, too, but thus far they haven't been able to find buyers for the loans. The government plans to fix this problem by sweetening the deal for the buyers. In one part of the new program, investors can apply to buy "legacy loans" with some of their own money, and a great deal more of the federal government's money.

The other part of the program might be even more of a bonanza. The government will designate about five funds—really big funds, the kind whose top executives are either billionaires or used to be and hope to be again—as buyers of "legacy securities," financial instruments made out of bundles of loans that have been repackaged and resold. The funds put up at least five hundred million dollars each, and the government puts up at least a billion dollars more. Some of this money would come in the form of "non-recourse loans," meaning that the funds would be protected from bad consequences if they default. They will get the miraculous money-making effects of buying assets with borrowed money, without the risk of utter ruin that, as we have seen lately, usually goes along with it. The funds get to pick only the best-rated of the big banks' bad assets and to review them carefully before buying. Best of all, they also get to borrow large amounts of money from a special government fund that was previously closed to them.

It's conceivable that this plan could work for the funds but fail to save the banks, which will still have lots more bad assets on their books. As long as it works for the funds, some very, very rich people are going to get much richer, thanks to once-in-a-lifetime favorable terms provided by the federal government and unavailable to the rest of us. What then? It will be a few years before this has played out. Maybe by that time the economy will be better, and the country will have calmed down. If not, the dynamic we have seen in the past few weeks will only become more severe, and who knows what kinds of social poison will work their way into the fabric of American life.

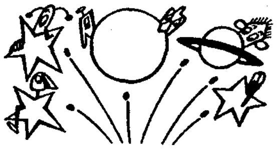
Those in Washington who say they represent, or even embody, the public's anger at bankers should do their constituents a favor by focussing not on whom to demonize but on the hard work of building support for a program that would actually help people. Those who aren't angry—like, maybe, President Obama—ought to stop pretending they are, and, instead, try to persuade the country that pure rage is not something to be honored and respected at this dangerous moment.

—*Nicholas Lemann*



*"Acting responsibly is below my pay grade."*

## BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.
## SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY



In 1978, the word "frak," as in "Go frak yourself!," quietly entered and exited the lexicon, when the ABC science-fiction drama "Battlestar Galactica," which had introduced it, was cancelled after one season. Twenty-seven years later, the Sci Fi Channel brought back the show, sidestepping the channel's proscription against a certain expletive.

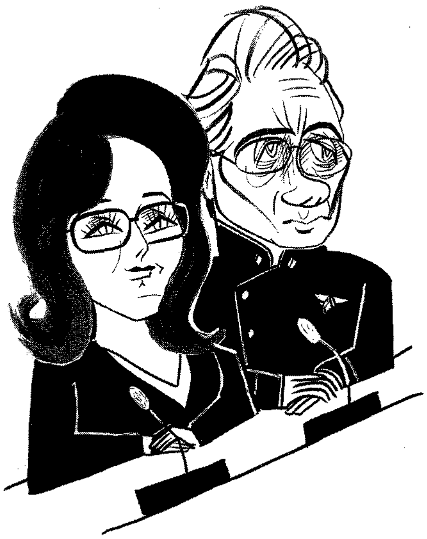
The other night, a few days before the show's four-year run as a cult hit ended, the United Nations opened its Economic and Social Council Chamber for a panel discussion on how "Battlestar Galactica" might inform the international body's approach to some problems of the day: terrorism, torture, religious conflict. (The evening was part of the U.N.'s new "creative community outreach" program.) Placards at the seats, which earlier had identified delegates from France and Venezuela, now read "Caprica" and "Aquarion." The panel included William Adama (played by Edward James Olmos), the admiral of the spaceship Galactica, and Laura Roslin (played by Mary McDonnell), the president of the Twelve Colonies, along with two producers from "B.S.G." and a handful of earthbound U.N. dignitaries. Whoopi Goldberg, a big fan of the show, had been enlisted to moderate. The line of sci-fi buffs snaked out the door. A sign on the wall reading "Smoking Discouraged" (the U.N. is not subject to New York City regulations) enhanced the feeling that the event was taking place in another dimension. What the frak?

"Battlestar Galactica" depicts a race of robots called Cylons, who morph into sentient beings in order to nuke the humans, a.k.a. Colonials, who created them, and thus addresses issues of wartime justice and moral relativism. In one episode, a Cylon is treated to the deep-space version of waterboarding. In another, President Roslin channels George W. Bush: "My job is and always will be to keep the people safe."

Dave Howe, the Sci Fi president, declared that, like the U.N., "great science fiction forces us to look at who we are and ask the tough questions: Where are we going? . . . And what can we expect to find when we get there?" The U.N. officials were a little fuzzier on the analogy. One admitted to never having seen the show, and Radhika Coomaraswamy, the special representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, said she had hastily watched a few episodes in preparation. ("It was really nice to see not just special effects," she said.) Craig Mokhiber, a U.N. deputy director, suggested that, in today's times, "every one of us is a Cylon, and every one of us is a Colonial."

The panel went on to talk about gender equality (Ron Moore, "B.S.G." producer: "We sort of decided that the word that rhymes with 'witch' wouldn't really be used"), sectarian strife (the bad guys, counterintuitively, are the monotheists), and technological hazards (Goldberg: "One of the reasons that Cylons come into being is because people get lazy"). During a Q. & A., a man asked whether the Colonials' use of the "airlock" as an execution device—ejecting the condemned into outer space—was truly justice. Olmos, in character as the hawkish admiral, cited Dick Cheney's recent criticisms of Obama's handling of national security: "Right away you understand exactly where he's coming from."

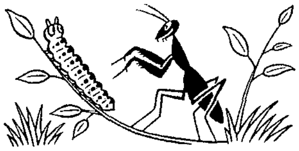
Afterward, guests moved to the Delegates' Dining Room for Peking-duck rolls and artichoke cheesecake. In one corner of the room, a friend asked Mary McDonnell, "How are you doing? You're in a room with real sci-fi geeks." Two married "B.S.G." partisans, Colin Fisher and Nicole Horejsi, were happy to be among their own kind. "Look at the nerds," Fisher said, holding up a glass. "Free alcohol makes us social!" Horejsi teaches literature at Columbia (some classicists see the show as a retelling of the Aeneid). " 'Battlestar Galactica' repays you the way great literature does," she said. "The show is as complex, as sophisticated and nuanced, as any kind of text that I've encountered, and the discussion tonight was on a par with the academic conferences that I've attended." She went on, "My students always laugh when I recommend 'B.S.G.' to them. Whatever. They're eighteen."



*Mary McDonnell, Edward James Olmos*

—*Mike Peed*

## D.I.Y. DEPT.
## BIRDS, BEES, FISH



Two zoologists walked into a bar. They were guests at a reception for their friend Isabella Rossellini, the actress and model, whose latest project, "Green Porno," is a series of one-to-three-minute-long films about animal reproduction. "When we first met, she was next to me at a dinner party, and she told me that what she always wanted to be was a zoologist," one of them, Joshua Ginsberg, a vice-president at the Wildlife Conservation Society, said of Rossellini. "She grew up with a man named Luigi Boitani."

"Oh, wolves!" the other, Natalie Cash, a former producer of animal documentaries, said.

"She thought about studying wolves with Luigi in Italy," Ginsberg said. "And her greatest regret was not pursuing it."

Rossellini had just finished the second season of "Green Porno," which is half comical and half educational, and has won the approval of some conservationists. Rossellini writes, directs, and stars, wearing colorful arts-and-craftsy costumes. The first season received nearly four million hits on YouTube and on the Web site of the Sundance Channel. It focussed on insects and other garden-dwelling creatures: praying mantises, dragonflies, earthworms. The second season is about marine life, which Rossellini has described as "more scandalous than bugs"—an assertion that Ginsberg questioned, citing the fact that female spiders eat their mates after sex.

"Bugs are where it's at," Ginsberg said. "Fish are sort of interesting, because some of them start out as boys and turn into girls. But, basically, mammals are really boring." The room was full of mammals dressed in black, awaiting a screening of some of the new episodes. Ginsberg turned to face Cash and said, "Are we going to see shrimp tonight?"

"I think we're going to see shrimp," she said.

"We're not seeing my favorite, which is squid," Ginsberg said.

"Squid is awesome, yeah."

Mammals, boring though their sexual practices may be, nonetheless offer plenty of taxonomic possibilities, and the conservationists soon addressed the role of habitat in classifying a subspecies of "green" celebrity. "The difference between New York actors and L.A. actors—and I'll get in lots of trouble for saying this—" Ginsberg began. "But do we have any L.A. actors on the zoo's board still?"

"No, they're gone now," Cash said.

"New York actors have this amazing complexity and intelligence," Ginsberg went on. "And I think Isabella, a New Yorker, is astonishing for being, quote, the most beautiful woman in the world and not letting it go to her head."

"When she came to screenings at the zoo, she took the train up—the subway!" Cash said. "I'm trying to think of how I would compare the message in this show to, like, the latest Pamela Anderson Kentucky Fried Cruelty ad, where you think it's going to be the next sex video." Pamela Anderson does work for PETA, which, as it happens, is engaged in its own ocean-awareness campaign, attempting to rebrand fish as cuddly "sea kittens."

"I feel like if this was L.A. she would be popping out of a cake now," Cash said, gesturing toward Rossellini, who was fully clothed and mingling, preparing to introduce the first segment, called "Why Vagina?," with a shout-out to Ginsberg. ("I gave her a book on mammalian genitalia," he explained.) Next came shorts in which Rossellini was dressed as a whale, a limpet, an anglerfish, and a barnacle—which turns out to have the largest penis of all, relative to its body size. Rossellini's barnacle costume included a twenty-foot-long extension.

Ginsberg said, "George Schaller, who's our God—he's the first person who did serious studies on pandas, lions, tigers—"

"Mountain gorillas, snow leopards," Cash added.

"George said, 'As a zoologist, you spend ninety-five per cent of your time watching animals sleep.' Sex and death happen occasionally, but you have to be really patient to see them."

"We have two mandrills," Cash said, referring to the Bronx Zoo's Congo Gorilla Forest exhibit. "And one, the male, has been nicknamed Handrill—Handrill the mandrill."

"So, yeah, if you're really patient you get your live performance," Ginsberg said.

Cash asked if she could speak off the record and told a story involving a pair of speckled bears at the Queens Zoo. "I'll go on record," Ginsberg said. "What better way to educate your children?"

—*Ben McGrath*

## THE BOARDS
## PRIMARY SOURCES

In 1819, the music publisher Anton Diabelli wrote a waltz and sent it to fifty composers, asking each to contribute a variation. They all agreed, except one—Ludwig van Beethoven, who dismissed the waltz as a *Schusterfleck*, or "cobbler's patch." But then something happened: Beethoven became obsessed with Diabelli's waltz, and ended up writing thirty-three variations that constitute one of his most beloved pieces for piano—Opus 120. (Imagine Harold Bloom writing a six-hundred-page treatise on "The Biggest Loser.") So why did Beethoven do it? That is the question that haunts Dr. Katherine Brandt, the character played by Jane Fonda in the new play "33 Variations," who is loosely based on Dr. William Kinderman, a musicologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the leading authority on the "Diabelli Variations."

"There is no doubt that Beethoven had an ironic attitude toward the waltz," Kinderman was saying, in the lounge of the Crowne Plaza, before the opening-night performance. As a graduate student in 1979, he spent a month poring over manuscripts at the Beethoven archive, in Bonn. His biggest breakthrough had to do with the time line of the piece: the variations that were written last—including Nos. 1, 15, and 25—tend to relate more closely to the original theme, hinting that Beethoven's intentions evolved. "It's a paradox," Kinderman said. "If he's taking over this waltz by Diabelli, which has banal and repetitious features, and he's writing a gigantic work, then how does he reconcile those two tendencies? He did it by adding more variations that go back pointedly to the theme, in ways that exaggerate the banal features—that take it into the area of caricature." In the final variations, Beethoven lifts the piece beyond parody. "There's an ennobling process, a spiritualization, that goes on," Kinderman continued. "But there's a wink at the original theme in the last moments. It's as if Beethoven is looking back and saying, 'Well, I could have written even more.' "

About five years ago, Kinderman got an e-mail from the playwright Moisés Kaufman, who had taken an interest in the "Diabelli Variations" after chatting with a salesman at Tower Records. Kaufman visited Kinderman in Illinois, where they engaged in "intense brainstorming sessions" around the piano. Kinderman never expected to be played by Jane Fonda. "I enjoy surprising twists," he said.

At the hotel, he was joined by his wife, Katherine Syer, and their six-year-old daughter, Anna. Syer is also a musicologist ("Opera is my shtick"). She had spent the day at the Columbia rare-books library, studying the letters of the Hungarian conductor Anton Seidl, while Kinderman took Anna to Toys R Us.

A few minutes before curtain, the musicologists brushed past a crowd that included Dolly Parton, David Hyde Pierce, and Rosie O'Donnell, and took their seats. At intermission, they were greeted by Dominick Balletta, the general manager of Kaufman's theatre company. Kinderman gave him a technical note: "At one point, Variation 26 is played, but on the screen it says 'Variation 21.' "

Balletta threw up his hands: "*You* have that conversation with Moisés!"

Afterward, the family took a cab to the opening-night party. (The driver, a Vietnam vet, had a few things to say about Jane Fonda.) On the buffet line—not realizing that he was standing behind Geoffrey Rush—Kinderman reflected on Beethoven. "He's often depicted as a scowling, overserious figure, whereas actually he was a great punster," he said. Then he spotted Susan Kellermann, the actress who plays the archivist in Bonn. "Did you know you were modelled on Dr. Michael Ladenburger?" he asked.

Once the family had eaten, they tracked down Kaufman, who led them through the crowd to meet Fonda. "This is Bill—it's because of him that I got to see the archives," Kaufman told her. Fonda smiled and suggested that they have dinner later in the run. "That would be delightful!" Kinderman said. (He was looking forward to asking "what the music said to her.")

Anna was fading—it was time to go. The next day, the family was returning to Illinois; in August, they will move to Munich, while Syer researches a book about Wagner's "Ring." "In the last ten years, there's been an absolute explosion in the number of productions being done," she explained. "I'm trying to chart it. It's a daunting project, but it's so me."

—*Michael Schulman*

## THE FINANCIAL PAGE
# BALANCING BANKS

Not long ago, many of America's biggest banks made terrible bets on overpriced real estate and suffered huge losses. While the banks insisted that they were fundamentally healthy, economists and politicians declared many of them to be insolvent. Government regulators, though, allowed the banks to stay in business. The banks hunkered down and cut back sharply on new lending, and the resulting credit crunch made an already weak economy worse.

That sounds like the story of what just happened to the U.S. economy, but actually it's the story of what happened at the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, after banks found themselves sitting on billions in worthless loans to Sun Belt developers and other commercial builders. And, if you tweak the details a bit, it's also the story of what happened in the early eighties; that time, it was loans to developing countries that got the banks in trouble. In other words, while the current banking crisis is exceptionally severe, it's not exactly new. It's the third major banking crisis in the past thirty years, which is at least a couple of crises too many. And that's forcing the Obama Administration to confront two huge tasks at once: rescuing the economy from the current meltdown, and figuring out how to prevent the next one.

The rescue effort, surprisingly, may be the easier of those tasks; although recurrent financial turmoil is hardly a confidence-booster, the fact that the U.S. economy—unlike, say, Japan's—has recovered well from previous banking disasters offers hope that the government's strategy will work. Many economists and pundits have argued that the only solution is to nationalize the weakest big banks, wiping out shareholders and management. Obama has adopted a more cautious and incremental strategy, incorporating approaches like the one unveiled last week by Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, which will use low-cost, no-risk loans to encourage private investors to buy up toxic assets—on the assumption that, if the economy improves, bank balance sheets will, too.

Critics of this approach say that it's simply papering over the problem, but it has worked before. During the crisis of the early nineties, for instance, the government did not take over the insolvent money-center banks (as opposed to the S. & L.s). Instead, regulators exercised "forbearance" and the Federal Reserve slashed interest rates, boosting bank profit margins. Over time, increased profits stabilized the banks' balance sheets, and, in a couple of years, they went from insolvency to reasonable health. Today's crisis is, to be sure, far bigger. But so, too, has been the government's response, including a plethora of new initiatives—the stimulus package, the mortgage-relief program, the Geithner plan—and unprecedented activity by the Fed, which has been buying up commercial paper, intervening in the securities market, and purchasing Treasury bonds with the goal of driving down loan rates. Nationalization advocates want the Administration to deal with our banking problems by cutting the Gordian knot. Instead, Obama is trying to unbraid it, strand by strand.

One danger of this approach is that it may fail, forcing us to take over the banks after all. There's another danger, though: that it will succeed. The U.S. financial system is fundamentally unhealthy, too big and volatile for anyone's good. And right now there's a great deal of pressure to meaningfully reform it. If Obama's strategy works, though, and the banks squeak through reasonably intact, that reformist pressure may well dissipate. After all, previous bank meltdowns have produced plenty of rhetoric about the need for better regulation, without much action. We've been like people living on a floodplain who during the deluge talk about moving or making the levees higher but end up rebuilding in the same spot. As a result, a small number of banks (and other financial institutions, like A.I.G.) have become ever bigger and more crucial to the U.S. economy, while the government's tools to manage and mitigate the systemic risks they pose have not kept pace. It's unrealistic to think that we can prevent banking crises per se; as the economists Kenneth Rogoff and Carmen Reinhart have documented, the world has had eight centuries of financial crises, in countries with many different regulatory schemes. But it should be possible to insure that when bankers go careering off the road they don't take the rest of us with them.

Now, there is an argument that the only way to do this is, again, to nationalize—take over the big financial institutions and break them up. But nationalization would be an expensive and risky endeavor in the middle of a crisis, and it's unclear that Congress would be willing to fund it. Instead, Geithner last week unveiled, along with the bailout plan, a series of proposals for stronger regulation, calling for limits on the amount of leverage financial institutions can use, a system-wide regulator to replace the current patchwork arrangement, and an end to a situation where banks are kept afloat because they're "too big to fail." These proposals are more than moonshine, and strict regulation has worked elsewhere. In effect, the Administration is trying to do two things at once. In solving the current crisis, it's partnering with Wall Street, using the existing system to try to stabilize the economy. But in thinking about the future it's trying to use hostility to Wall Street to bring about serious changes in the system. This is quite a balancing act: let's hope the Administration can pull it off.

—*James Surowiecki*

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ANNALS OF NATIONAL SECURITY

# SYRIA CALLING

*The Obama Administration's chance to engage in a Middle East peace.*

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

When the Israelis' controversial twenty-two-day military campaign in Gaza ended, on January 18th, it also seemed to end the promising peace talks between Israel and Syria. The two countries had been engaged for almost a year in negotiations through intermediaries in Istanbul. Many complicated technical matters had been resolved, and there were agreements in principle on the normalization of diplomatic relations. The consensus, as an ambassador now serving in Tel Aviv put it, was that the two sides had been "a lot closer than you might think."

At an Arab summit in Qatar in mid-January, however, Bashar Assad, the President of Syria, angrily declared that Israel's bombing of Gaza and the resulting civilian deaths showed that the Israelis spoke only "the language of blood." He called on the Arab world to boycott Israel, close any Israeli embassies in the region, and sever all "direct or indirect ties with Israel." Syria, Assad said, had ended its talks over the Golan Heights.

Nonetheless, a few days after the Israeli ceasefire in Gaza, Assad said in an e-mail to me that although Israel was "doing everything possible to undermine the prospects for peace," he was still very interested in closing the deal. "We have to wait a little while to see how things will evolve and how the situation will change," Assad said. "We still believe that we need to conclude a serious dialogue to lead us to peace."

American and foreign government officials, intelligence officers, diplomats, and politicians said in interviews that renewed Israeli-Syrian negotiations over the Golan Heights are now highly likely, despite Gaza and the elections in Israel in February, which left the Likud Party leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, at the head of a coalition that includes both the far right and Labor. Those talks would depend largely on America's willingness to act as the mediator, a role that could offer Barack Obama his first—and perhaps best—chance for engagement in the Middle East peace process.

A senior Syrian official explained that Israel's failure to unseat Hamas from power in Gaza, despite the scale of the war, gave Assad enough political room to continue the negotiations without losing credibility in the Arab world. Assad also has the support of Arab leaders who are invested in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Sheikh Hamid bin Khalifa al-Thani, the ruler of Qatar, said last month when I saw him in Doha that Assad must take any reasonable steps he can to keep the talks going. "Syria is eager to engage with the West," he said, "an eagerness that was never perceived by the Bush White House. Anything is possible, as long as peace is being pursued."

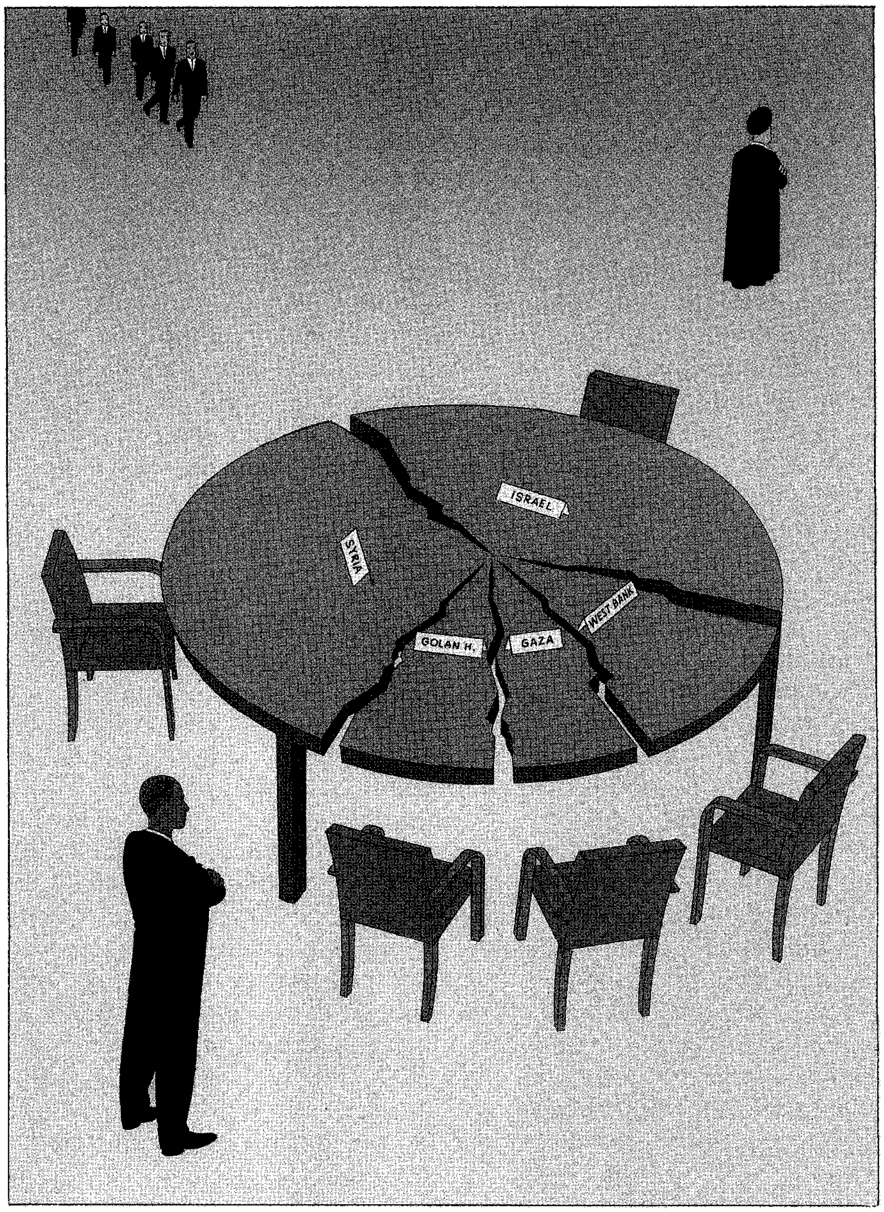
A major change in American policy toward Syria is clearly under way. "The return of the Golan Heights is part of a broader strategy for peace in the Middle East that includes countering Iran's influence," Martin Indyk, a former American Ambassador to Israel, who is now the director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, at the Brookings Institution, said. "Syria is a strategic linchpin for dealing with Iran and the Palestinian issue. Don't forget, everything in the Middle East is connected, as Obama once said."

A former American diplomat who has been involved in the Middle East peace process said, "There are a lot of people going back and forth to Damascus from Washington saying there is low-hanging fruit waiting for someone to harvest." A treaty between Syria and Israel "would be the start of a wide-reaching peace-implementation process that will unfold over time." He added, "The Syrians have been ready since the 1993 Oslo Accords to do a separate deal." The new Administration now has to conduct "due diligence": "Get an ambassador there, or a Presidential envoy. Talk to Bashar, and speak in specifics so you'll know whether or not you've actually got what you've asked for. If you're vague, don't be surprised if it comes back to bite you."

Many Israelis and Americans involved in the process believe that a deal on the Golan Heights could be a way to isolate Iran, one of Syria's closest allies, and to moderate Syria's support for Hamas and for Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite group. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are listed as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department. There is a competing view: that Assad's ultimate goal is not to marginalize Iran but to bring it, too, into regional talks that involve America—and perhaps Israel. In either scenario, Iran is a crucial factor motivating each side.

These diplomatic possibilities were suggested by Senator John Kerry, of Massachusetts, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, who met with Assad in Damascus in February—his third visit since Assad took office, in 2000. "He wants to engage with the West," Kerry said in an interview in his Senate office. "Our latest conversation gave me a much greater sense that Assad is willing to do the things that he needs to do in order to change his relationship with the United States. He told me he's willing to engage positively with Iraq, and have direct discussions with Israel over the Golan Heights—with Americans at the table. I will encourage the Administration to take him up on it.

"Of course, Syria will not suddenly move against Iran," Kerry said. "But the Syrians will act in their best interest, as they did in their indirect negotiations with Israel with Turkey's assistance—and over the objections of Iran."



*Iran is a crucial factor motivating renewed Israeli-Syrian negotiations.*

GUY BILLOUT

President Assad was full of confidence and was impatiently anticipating the new Administration in Washington when I spoke to him late last year in Damascus. Trained as an ophthalmologist, partly in London, he took over the Presidency in 2000, after the death of his father, Hafez Assad, who amassed enormous personal power in thirty years of brutal rule. Bashar had not expected a life as the Syrian leader—his older brother, Basil, who was killed in an accident in 1994, had been groomed to replace their father. Bashar, thirty-four when he became President, was said to be a lesser figure than either of them. He has since consolidated his position—both by modernizing the economy and by suppressing domestic opposition—and, when we spoke, it was clear that he had come to relish the exercise of power.

Assad said that if America's leaders "are seeking peace they have to deal with Syria and they have to deal with our rights, which is the Golan Heights." In the Six-Day War, in 1967, Israel seized the Golan Heights, about four hundred and fifty square miles of territory that is rich in Biblical history and, crucially, in water. It includes part of the Jordan River Valley and a plateau overlooking the river which extends to Mt. Hermon, in the north. Syria was left with no access to the Sea of Galilee and the upper Jordan River. Roughly twenty thousand Israeli settlers live there, and they have built towns, vineyards, and boutique hotels in its valleys and strategic heights.

Assad said, "The land is not negotiable, and the Israelis know that we are not going to negotiate the line of 1967." But he suggested that compromises were possible. "We only demarcate the line," he said. "We negotiate the relations, the water, and everything else." Many who are close to the process assume that an Israeli-Syrian settlement would include reparations for the Israelis in the Golan Heights, and, for a time, the right of access to the land. Assad said, "You discuss everything after the peace and getting your land. Not before."

If Israel wants a settlement that goes

beyond the Golan Heights, Assad said, it will have to "deal with the core issue"—the situation in the West Bank and Gaza—"and not waste time talking about who is going to send arms to Hezbollah or Hamas. Wherever you have resistance in the region, they will have armaments somehow. It is very simple." He added, "Hezbollah is in Lebanon and Hamas is in Palestine. . . . If they want to solve the problem of Hezbollah, they have to deal with Lebanon. For Hamas, they have to deal with Gaza. For Iran, it is not part of the peace process anyway." Assad went on, "This peace is about peace between Syria and Israel."

In his e-mail after the Gaza war, Assad emphasized that it was more than ever "essential that the United States play a prominent and active role in the peace process." What he needed, Assad said, was direct contact with Obama. A conference would not be enough: "It is most natural to want a meeting with President Obama."

If the Netanyahu government is to trade land for peace, it needs to be assured of domestic political support—and help from Washington. In September, 2007, Israel destroyed what it claimed was a potential Syrian nuclear-weapons reactor during a cross-border raid, an action that won the approval of the Israeli public. (Syria insisted there was no reactor on the site.) At the time, the two countries were already laying the groundwork for the indirect negotiations. In December, 2008, Ehud Olmert, who was then Prime Minister, flew to Ankara, Turkey, and conducted more than five hours of intense talks on the return of the Golan Heights, with the mediation of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was often in direct telephone contact with Bashar Assad. But Olmert's standing was tarnished, both inside Israel, by a series of criminal investigations that led to his resignation (he has denied any wrongdoing), and outside Israel, by the Gaza war, which began days after he left Ankara.

Netanyahu's coalition government will include, as Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, the head of the Israel Beytenu Party, who has argued for a measure, aimed at Israeli-Arabs, requiring citizens to take loyalty oaths or forfeit many of their rights, and has rejected any land-for-peace agreement with Syria (though he is open to trading other territories); and, as Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, the Labor Party leader, who has consistently supported talks with Syria. Current opinion polls indicate that the majority of Israelis do not support a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Netanyahu himself—in what was widely seen as a plea for votes—declared two days before the elections that he would not return the Golan Heights.

Daniel Levy, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, who served on Israeli peace delegations in 1995 and 2001 and also as an adviser to Prime Minister Barak, said that Netanyahu "may have huge coalition problems, not least within his own Likud Party," and that he "may have to publicly disavow any land-for-peace agreement, given his political position. Can the Syrians swallow that? If they can't, it means that the only option left will be secret talks." Levy added, "Barak's appointment does not change the fundamental dynamics of the coalition, but it means that Bibi [Netanyahu] has a Defense Minister who will be on board for dealing with Syria, who wants to deal with Syria—and who also will be on board for doing it in secret."

Itamar Rabinovich, a former Israeli Ambassador to Washington, who was Israel's chief negotiator with Syria under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and informally advises his government on Syrian issues, argued that the war in Gaza had not changed Israel's essential interest in a Golan Heights settlement: "Gaza is Gaza, and I say that Bashar Assad definitely wants to go ahead with the talks. And he may find a partner in Bibi Netanyahu. Bibi would prefer to make a deal with Syria rather than with the Palestinians."

But if the talks are to proceed, Rabinovich said, "they will have to be transformed to direct negotiations." This would require the support and involvement of the Obama Administration. Rabinovich said that he thought Obama, like Netanyahu, "after weighing the pros and cons, will see a Golan Heights settlement as being more feasible" than a deal with the Palestinians. "The talks are serious, and there is a partner."

The former American diplomat, who is an expert on the Golan Heights, said that it would take between three and five years to evacuate Israelis living there. "During that time, if there is a party moderating the agreement—the U.S., perhaps—it would be necessary for that party to stay engaged, to make sure that the process stays on course," he said. This factor may explain why Assad wants the U.S. involved. "The key point is that the signing of an

*"I thought you were my gay best friend."*

agreement is just the beginning—and third parties are needed to reinforce the agreement."

Obama's Middle East strategy is still under review in the State Department and the National Security Council. The Administration has been distracted by the economic crisis, and impeded by the large number of key foreign- and domestic-policy positions yet to be filled. Obama's appointment of former Senator George Mitchell as his special envoy for Middle East diplomacy, on January 22nd, won widespread praise, but Mitchell has yet to visit Syria. Diplomatic contacts with Damascus were expanded in late February, and informal exchanges with Syria have already taken place. According to involved diplomats, the Administration's tone was one of dialogue and respect—and not a series of demands. For negotiations to begin, the Syrians understood that Washington would no longer insist that Syria shut down the Hamas liaison office in Damascus and oust its political leader, Khaled Meshal. Syria, instead, will be asked to play a moderating role with the Hamas leadership, and urge a peaceful resolution of Hamas's ongoing disputes with Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The Syrians were also told that the Obama Administration was reëvaluating the extent of Syria's control over Hezbollah. (The White House did not respond to requests for comment.)

The United States has been involved in negotiations over the Golan Heights before, notably those brokered by Bill Clinton in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in 2000. Those talks, despite their last-minute collapse over border disputes, among other issues, provided the backbone for the recent indirect negotiations. Martin Indyk, who advised Clinton at Shepherdstown, said that those talks were about "territory for peace." Now, he said, "it's about territory for peace *and* strategic realignment."

During the long campaign for the White House, Obama often criticized Syria for its links to terrorism, its "pursuit of weapons of mass destruction," and its interference in Lebanon, where Syria had troops until 2005 and still plays a political role. (Assad dismissed the criticisms in his talk with me: "We do not bet on speeches during the campaign.") But Obama said that he would be willing to sit down with Assad in the first year of his Presidency without preconditions. He also endorsed the Syrian peace talks with Israel. "We must never force Israel to the negotiating table, but neither should we ever block negotiations when Israel's leaders decide that they may serve Israeli interests," he said at the annual conference, last June, of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). "As President, I will do whatever I can to help Israel succeed in these negotiations."

The differences between Obama's Syria policies and those of the Administration of George W. Bush have attracted relatively little attention. In December, 2006, the Iraq Study Group called for direct talks with Syria. In a speech soon afterward, Bush explained why he disagreed. "I think it would be counterproductive at this point to sit down with the Syrians, because Syria knows exactly what it takes to get better relations," he said. The President then provided a list: stop its support for Hamas and Hezbollah; stop meddling in Lebanon; coöperate in the investigation of the murder, in 2005, of Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's former Prime Minister; and stop serving as "a transit way for suicide bombers heading into Iraq." (The Bush Administration accused Syria of failing to monitor its long border with Iraq, and, last October, staged a raid into Syria, killing eight people, one of whom was said to be a senior Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia operative. A huge number of Iraqi refugees have also fled to Syria, straining the economy.) Bush added dismissively, "When people go sit down with Bashar Assad, the President of Syria, he walks out and holds a press conference, and says, 'Look how important I am. People are coming to see me; people think I'm vital.'"

An official who served with the Bush Administration said that late last year the Administration thought it was unrealistic to engage Syria on the Golan Heights. "The Bush view was, if we support the talks, with no preconditions, what are we going to say to our supporters in Lebanon who are standing up to Hezbollah? 'You stood up to Hezbollah'—and where are we?"

Assad noted late last year that the Bush White House did not "have to

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trust me, because they are not involved in peace anyway. . . .They created a lot of problems around the world and they exacerbated the situation in every hot spot [and] made the world more vulnerable to terrorism. This is the most important thing," he said. "Nobody can say the opposite."

As the Bush era wound down, U.S. allies were making their own openings to Syria. In mid-November, David Miliband, the British Foreign Secretary, distressed the White House by flying to Damascus for a meeting with Assad. They agreed that Britain and Syria would establish a high-level exchange of intelligence. Vice-President Dick Cheney viewed the move by Britain—"perfidious Albion," as he put it—as "a stab in the back," according to a former senior intelligence official.

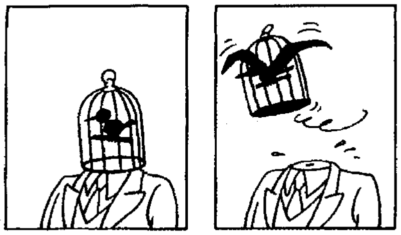
In his e-mail, Assad praised the diplomatic efforts of former President Jimmy Carter. "Carter is most knowledgeable about the Middle East and he does not try to dictate or give sermons," Assad said. "He sincerely is trying to think creatively and find solutions that are outside the box." Carter's calls for engagement with Hamas have angered many in Israel and America. In "We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land," published in January, Carter described Syria as "a key factor in any overall regional peace." Last December, Carter visited Syria, and met not only with President Assad but with Khaled Meshal, the Hamas leader.

A senior White House official confirmed that the Obama transition team had been informed in advance of Carter's trip to Syria, and that Carter met with Obama shortly before the Inauguration. The two men—Obama was accompanied only by David Axelrod, the President's senior adviser, who helped arrange the meeting; and Carter by his wife, Rosalynn—discussed the Middle East for an hour. Carter declined to discuss his meeting with Obama, but he did write in an e-mail that he hoped the new President "would pursue a wide-ranging dialogue as soon as possible with the Assad government." An understanding between Washington and Damascus, he said, "could set the stage for successful Israeli-Syrian talks."

The Obama transition team also helped persuade Israel to end the bombing of Gaza and to withdraw its ground troops before the Inauguration. According to the former senior intelligence official, who has access to sensitive information, "Cheney began getting messages from the Israelis about pressure from Obama" when he was President-elect. Cheney, who worked closely with the Israeli leadership in the lead-up to the Gaza war, portrayed Obama to the Israelis as a "pro-Palestinian," who would not support their efforts (and, in private, disparaged Obama, referring to him at one point as someone who would "never make it in the major leagues"). But the Obama team let it be known that it would not object to the planned resupply of "smart bombs" and other high-tech ordnance that was already flowing to Israel. "It was Jones"—retired Marine General James Jones, at the time designated to be the President's national-security adviser—"who came up with the solution and told Obama, 'You just can't tell the Israelis to get out.'" (General Jones said that he could not verify this account; Cheney's office declined to comment.)

Syria's relationship with Iran will emerge as the crucial issue in the diplomatic reviews now under way in Washington. A settlement, the Israelis believe, would reduce Iran's regional standing and influence. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall when Bashar goes to Tehran and explains to the Supreme Leader that he wants to mediate a bilateral relationship with the United States," the former American diplomat said, referring to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

An Israeli official acknowledged that his government had learned of "tensions between Syria and Iran in recent months." Before Gaza, he said, there had been a noticeable change in the Syrian tone during informal contacts—"an element of openness, candor, and civility." He cautioned, however, "You can move diplomatically with the Syrians, but you cannot ignore Syria's major role in arming Hamas and Hezbollah, or the fact that it has intimate relations with Iran, whose nuclear program is still going forward." He added, with a smile, "No one in Israel is running out to buy a new suit for the peace ceremony on the White House lawn."



Martin Indyk said, "If the White House engages with Syria, it immediately puts pressure on Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah." He said that he had repeatedly sought, without success, to convince the Bush Administration that it was possible to draw Syria away from Iran. In his recent memoir, "Innocent Abroad," Indyk wrote, "There is a deep divergence between Iran and Syria, captured in the fact that at the same time as Iran's president threatens to wipe Israel off the map, his Syrian ally is attempting to make peace with Israel. . . . Should negotiations yield a peace agreement, it would likely cause the breakup of the Iranian-Syrian axis." When we spoke, he added, referring to Assad, "It will not be easy for him to break with Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran, but he cannot get a peace deal unless he does. But, if he feels that things are moving in the Middle East, he will not want to be left behind."

Thomas Dine, who served as the executive director of AIPAC in Washington for thirteen years, said, "You don't have to be Kissingerian to realize that this is the way to peel the onion from Iran." Dine went on, "Get what you can get and take one step at a time. The agenda is to get Syria to begin thinking about its relationships with Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah." A Pentagon consultant said, "If we ever really took yes for an answer from Syria, the Iranians would go nuts."

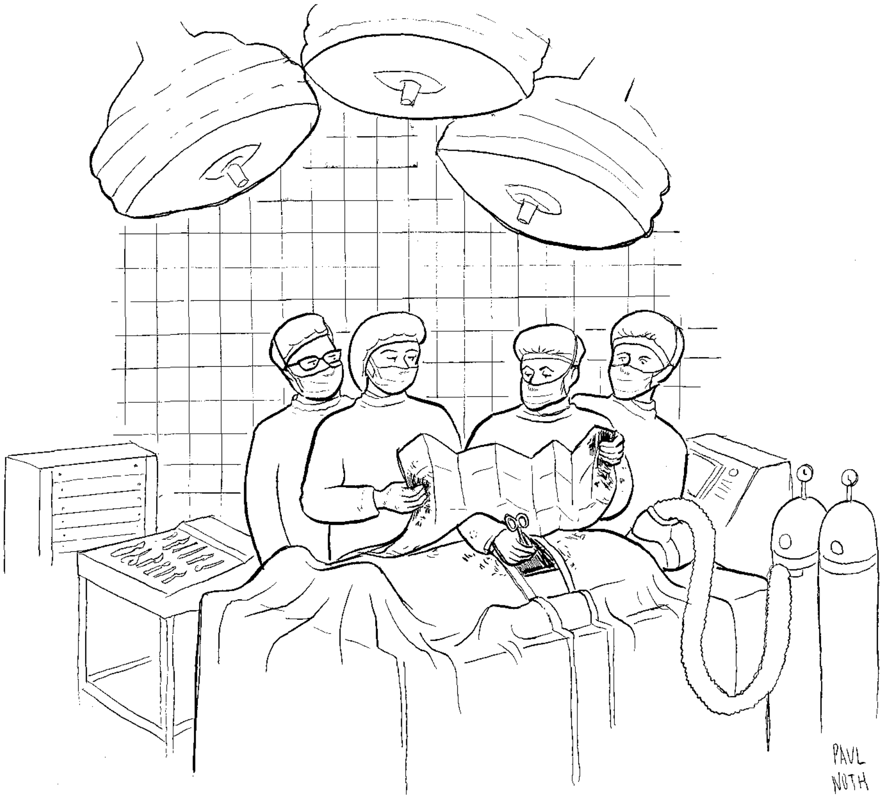
The official Syrian position toward Iran, which Assad repeated to me, is that Iran did not object to the Golan Heights talks, on the principle that any return of sovereign land was to be applauded: "They announced this publicly . . . and I went to Iran and I heard the same." But there is some evidence that the Syrians may be, in Dine's terms, reassessing the relationship. The senior Syrian official said that an opening to the West would bring the country increased tourism, trade, and investment, and a higher standard of living—progress that would eventually make it less reliant on Iran. If Israel then attacked Iran, he asked, "what will Syria do?" His answer was that Syria wouldn't do more than condemn the attack. "What else *could* we do?"

In an interview in Berlin, Joschka Fischer, the former German Foreign Minister, who has continued to closely monitor Middle Eastern affairs, argued that the Iranians would "have to make a public move" after a settlement. "Yes, they will react to an Israeli-Syria deal, because they do not want to be isolated, and do not want to lose their last ally to the West." In other words, serious regional diplomacy could be possible.

However, Alastair Crooke, a former British intelligence officer who operated in the Middle East and later served as an adviser to the European Union and a staff member for a fact-finding committee on the Middle East headed by Mitchell, said that the new Administration should not assume that Bashar Assad could be separated easily from Iran, or persuaded to give up support for Hamas and Hezbollah. "Bashar now has enormous standing in the Arab world, and it comes from these pillars—he was among the first to oppose the American war in Iraq and his continued support for Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas," Crooke said. "He cannot trade the Golan Heights for peace with Israel, and cut off his allies. What Syria can do is offer its good standing and credentials to lead a comprehensive regional settlement." But, he said, "the Obama Administration is going to make it really painful for Syria. There will be no bouquets for Syria."

He went on, "The real goal of Assad is not necessarily an agreement on the Golan but to begin to engage America and slice away the American demonization of his state." The changed political landscape in Israel would complicate this process for the Syrians. He said, "They're starting all these processes to break their isolation and change their strategy. It's going to be bloody difficult for them to manage this."

Robert Pastor, a former National Security Council official who has visited Damascus with former President Carter, similarly said that he believed the Syrians had no intention of ending their relationship with Iran. "The Syrians want bilateral talks with Washington and they also want America to be involved in their talks with Israel on the Golan Heights," Pastor said. "They also believe their relationship with Iran could be of help to the Obama Administration. They believe they could be a bridge between Washington and Tehran."



*"According to this, we're not even in Mrs. Feldman anymore."*

Khaled Meshal, the leader of Hamas, works in an office in a well-protected, tranquil residential area of Damascus. In recent years, he has met privately with Jewish leaders and Americans. Meshal is seen by Israel as a sponsor of suicide bombers and other terrorist activity. In 1997, he survived a botched assassination-by-poisoning attempt by Israeli intelligence which Netanyahu, then the Prime Minister, had ordered. Under pressure from Jordan and the U.S., the Israelis handed over the poison's antidote, saving Meshal's life.

Speaking through a translator, Meshal said that he believed that the Iranians would not interfere with negotiations between Israel and Syria, although they were not enthusiastic about them. Meshal also said he doubted that Israel intended to return the Golan Heights to Syrian control. But, he said, "If we suppose that Israel is serious, we support the right of Syria to negotiate with Israel to attain its legitimate rights."

Hamas's presence in Damascus had, he knew, been a contentious issue in Syria's relations with both the United States and Israel. "Bashar would never ask us to leave," he said. "There are some who believe that Hamas would react defensively to an agreement, because of our presence in Syria. But it does not make a difference where our offices are. We are a street movement and our real power is inside Palestine, and nothing can affect that. We are confident about Bashar Assad, and we would never risk being a burden to him. . . . We can move at any time, and move lightly. The Hamas movement will not work against the interests of any other country, and any agreement can be concluded, whether we like it or not. But, also, we don't want anyone to interfere in *our* affairs."

Farouk al-Shara, the Vice-President of Syria, was, as Foreign Minister, his nation's chief negotiator at Shepherdstown. When he was asked whether Syria's relationship with Iran would change if the Golan Heights issue was resolved, he said, "Do you think a man only goes to bed with a woman he deeply loves?" Shara laughed, and added, "That's my answer to your question about Iran."

There are other impediments to a new relationship between the United States and Syria, including the still unresolved question of who killed Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, who was assassinated in February, 2005. Years of investigation have produced no criminal charges. The Bush Administration suggested that the Syrians were at least indirectly responsible for Hariri's death—he had been a sharp critic of Syria's involvement in Lebanon—and it wasn't alone; Hariri's murder exacerbated tensions between Syria and France and Saudi Arabia. But the case is clearly less important to French President Nicolas Sarkozy than it was to his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, who was close to Hariri. ("This was personal for Chirac, and not political," Joschka Fischer said.) An adviser to the Saudi government said that King Abdullah did not accept Assad's assurances that he had nothing to do with the murder. But there has recently been a flurry of renewed diplomatic contacts between Damascus and Riyadh.

One issue that may be a casualty of an Obama rapprochement with Syria is human rights. Syrians are still being jailed for speaking out against the policies of their government. Sarah Leah Whitson, the Middle East director for Human Rights Watch, said that Assad "has been offering fig leafs to the Americans for a long time and thinks if he makes nice in Lebanon and with Hamas and Hezbollah he will no longer be an outcast. We believe that no amount of diplomatic success will solve his internal problems." The authorities, Whitson said, are "going after ordinary Syrians—like people chatting in cafés. Everyone is looking over their shoulder."

Assad, in his interview with me, acknowledged, "We do not say that we are a democratic country. We do not say that we are perfect, but we are moving forward." And he focussed on what he had to offer. He said that he had a message for Obama: Syria, as a secular state, and the United States faced a common enemy in Al Qaeda and Islamic extremism. The Bush White House, he said, had viewed the fundamentalists as groups "that you should go and chase, and then you will accomplish your mission, as Bush says. It is not that simple. How do you deal with a state of mind? You can deal with it in many different ways—except for the army." Speaking of Obama, he said in his e-mail, "We are happy that he has said that diplomacy—and not war—is the means of conducting international policy."

Assad's goal in seeking to engage with America and Israel is clearly more far-reaching than merely to regain the Golan Heights. His ultimate aim appears to be to persuade Obama to abandon the Bush Administration's strategy of aligning America with the so-called "moderate" Arab Sunni states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—in a coördinated front against Shiite Iran, Shiite Hezbollah, and Hamas.

"Of course, the Iranians are nervous about the talks, because they don't fully trust the Syrians," Itamar Rabinovich said. "But the Assad family does not believe in taking chances—they're very hard bargainers. They will try to get what they want without breaking fully from Iran, and they will tell us and Washington, 'It's to your advantage not to isolate Iran.' " Rabinovich added, "Both Israel and the United States will insist on a change in Syria's relationship with Iran. This can only be worked out—or not—in head-to-head talks."

The White House has tough diplomatic choices to make in the next few months. Assad has told the Obama Administration that his nation can ease the American withdrawal in Iraq. Syria also can help the U.S. engage with Iran, and the Iranians, in turn, could become an ally in neighboring Afghanistan, as the Obama Administration struggles to deal with the Taliban threat and its deepening involvement in that country—and to maintain its long-standing commitment to the well-being of Israel. Each of these scenarios has potential downsides. Resolving all of them will be formidable, and will involve sophisticated and intelligent diplomacy—the kind of diplomacy that disappeared during the past eight years, and that the Obama team has to prove it possesses. ♦

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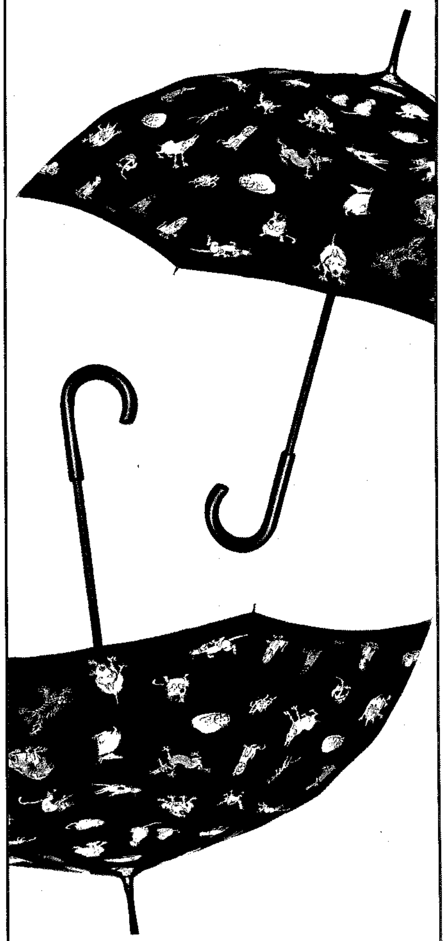

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### LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA

# CASH FOR KEYS

*L.A.'s go-to guy on foreclosures.*

### BY TAD FRIEND

Leo Nordine turned the front-door key and cat-footed into one of his three hundred homes, a four-bedroom in South Gate. "Hello, Leo Nordine!" he announced himself. He walked into a living room stuffed with boxes and saw three girls huddled under a blanket, watching the Disney Channel. "Why aren't you in school?" he asked, smiling.

The oldest, Valerie, said, "Our mom said because we have to move, to stay home and not tell anyone."

"Is your mom around?"

Nordine sells foreclosed houses in Los Angeles, which makes him a busy man. In 2006, he sold seventy-five houses for the banks; in 2008, he sold two hundred and eighty-two. This year, despite foreclosure moratoriums declared by several huge banks, by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and by the state of California—and despite the federal government's seventy-five-billion-dollar plan to help troubled homeowners—he expects to sell a house a day.

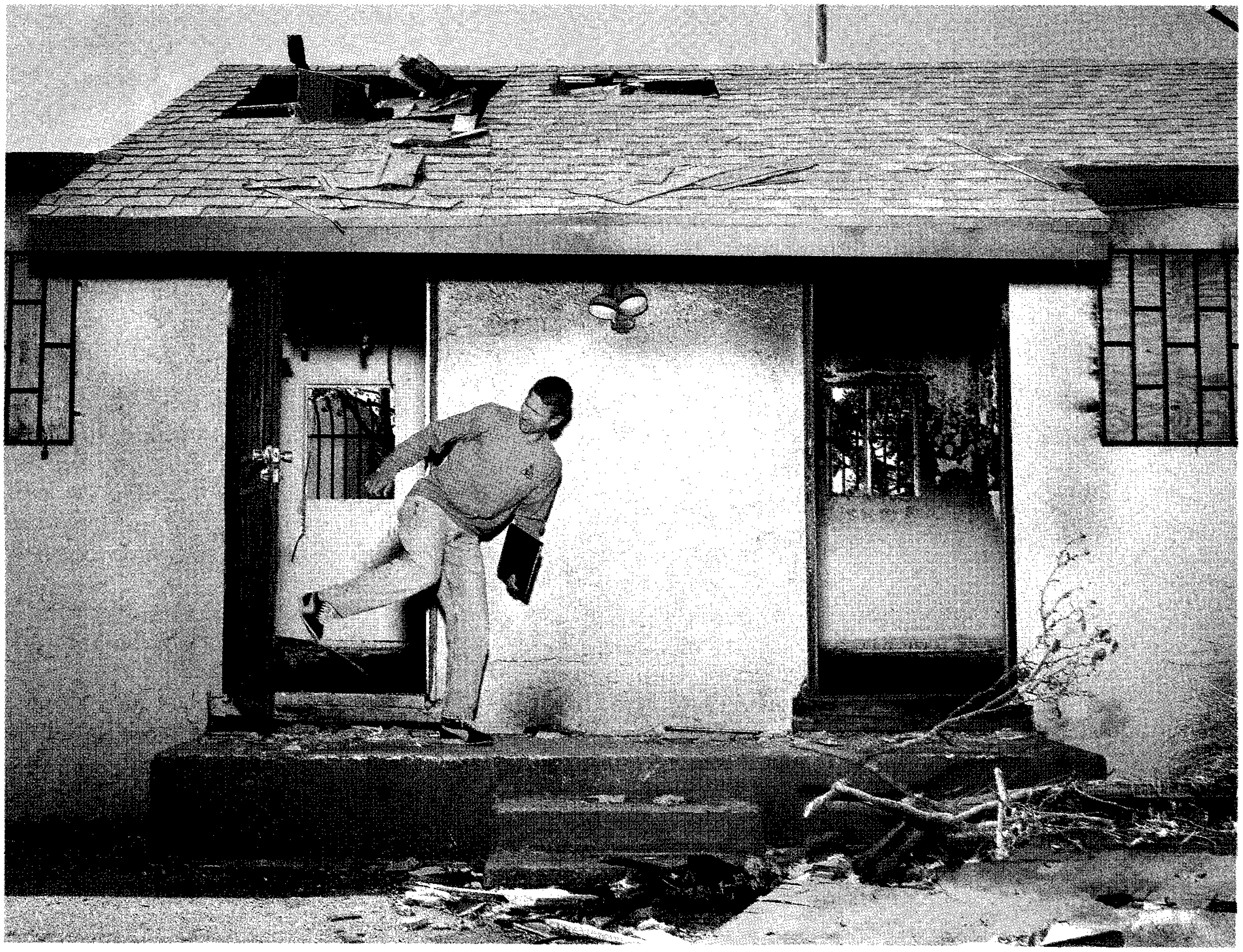
The whole game is volume and speed: Nordine, forty-six, is one of L.A.'s leading R.E.O. brokers (bank-derived shorthand for "other real estate owned"), because he treats his properties—which he cleans up, watches over, and pays the utilities on—like hot potatoes. He has a knack for pricing houses aggressively, so they sell fast, a valuable skill in a county where experienced sellers say that values are declining two to three per cent a month. "I use Leo pretty much exclusively in L.A.," Graham Parish, a senior asset manager for AssetLink, which handles defaulted mortgages for Fidelity National Financial, says. "His average days on market is fifty, which is phenomenal—with other brokers it's about a hundred and twenty. On a five-hundred-thousand-dollar property, he's saving us twenty thousand."

While driving to the house in South Gate on a late-January morning, Nordine began examining his case file at a stoplight, and then through a left turn. Hunched up in his wife's Toyota Prius, forgoing a seat belt, he explained, "The owner, Alicia Gonzalez, bought the place in 2001 for one hundred and seventy thousand, and refi'd in 2006"—at the peak of the bubble. "She pulled out four hundred and forty thousand from New Century, which was already in deep doodoo—terrible loans, specializing in people who didn't speak much English. We'll list it for two-ten." (The property later received multiple offers and went into escrow at $245,000.)

Having warned colleagues of the coming collapse as early as 2004, Nordine is not particularly sympathetic to banks and homeowners who collaborated on gimcrack loans in 2006, a folie à deux of suckers who expected real-estate values to rise forever. But in this case there was a complication: though the bank had foreclosed on Alicia Gonzalez in November, and sheriffs' deputies had locked her out a few days before Nordine's visit, in the interim she had rented part of the house to Valerie's unsuspecting mother and her family.

There is often a complication: the second house on a property in Lawndale that somehow vanished; the duplex in Compton where a neighbor donned a black mask to frighten off buyers; the doctor in Burbank who broke into his town house, brandished a knife at one of Nordine's field representatives, filed legal motions, and warned the bank's lawyer, "There will be blood." In late February, the day before the doctor returned again to the house and scared off potential bidders at an auction of his possessions, the bank e-mailed Nordine to say, "If not under contract by 4/20/09, we will be forced to move to another realtor." If Nordine can't unload a house fast enough, the banks unload him.

Valerie presented her mother, Carmen Cordera, a tired-looking woman who wiped her hands apologetically on a dishcloth and shook Nordine's hand. Then she led him on a tour, talking in rapid Spanish. "This place was so *dirty*," Valerie translated, "and we worked so hard cleaning it up." Stew bubbled on the stove, the dishwasher whined, and the washer and dryer vibrated, as if Cordera were making use of every appliance while she could.



*Banks hire Leo Nordine to sell their foreclosed properties. This year, he expects to make a sale a day. Photograph by Jeff Minton.*

Nordine nudged aside a yapping poodle with his sneaker and listened attentively; customarily barefoot, he puts on shoes only to visit his properties and to skateboard. He also wore board shorts and a white T-shirt, having got up at 4:30 A.M. to hit his favorite surf break—he is one of California's best paddle surfers—then drink five raw eggs and eat raw salmon jerky, then fight at his local martial-arts studio. The whites of his green eyes gleamed, in that rackety kitchen, with almost accusatory health.

Cordera showed him the checks she'd written to Alicia Gonzalez—fourteen hundred dollars for rent, and a seven-hundred-and-fifty-dollar security deposit—and made a gesture of woe. "My mom says can we have till the tenth to move, because we found a place in Lynwood, where she works in the lunchroom of the school, but we can't get in yet. Please?" Valerie asked.

"Yes," Nordine said.

"*Sí? Sí?*" Cordera said, astonished. She clapped her hands.

Nordine told Valerie, "And tell your mother she'll get her money back, I promise."

Afterward, in the Prius, Nordine said, "The bank won't like me giving them till the tenth, but tough shit. Helping that family made me happy." As a child, he was always moving; his mother, alcoholic and overweight, shuffled the family among stucco dumps in the South Bay, and Nordine was teased in school for wearing T-shirts from Goodwill. Believing that property is a bulwark against chaos, he owns nine rent-producing buildings along the coast. Yet he knows that even a dream house can do only so much. "In 1996, I bought my mom a house in Ashland, Oregon," he told me. "Two weeks later, she fell over dead on her new front lawn. What was weird was the day before she'd called me, for like the first time ever, to ask, 'Are you happy?' "

Since 2005, new foreclosures have more than tripled, to 2.2 million in 2008. This year, the figure could go even higher. In California, only ten per cent of the houses that banks will eventually reclaim have come on the market, according to Sean O'Toole, the founder of foreclosureradar.com. The rest is the hidden iceberg of "ghost inventory."

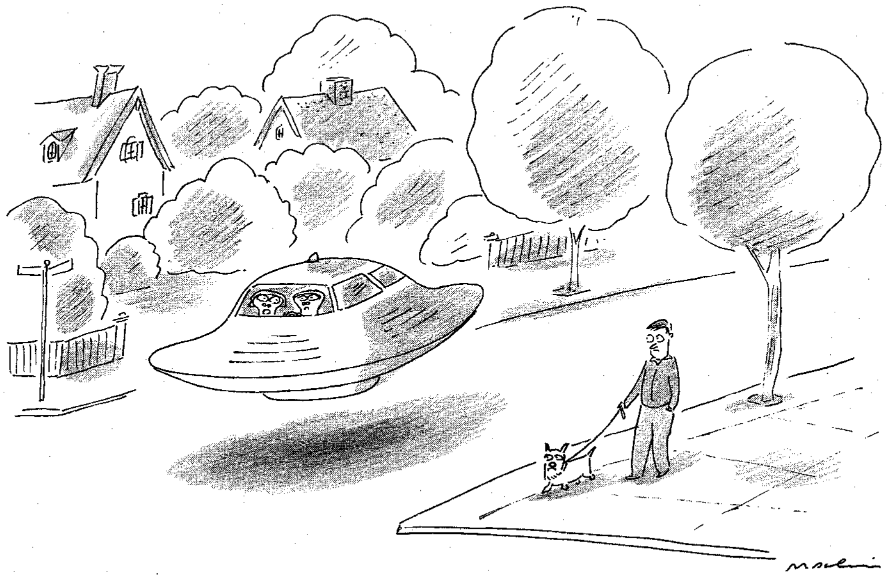
The collapse has come as a particular shock in the Golden State, where flipping houses was a sport and a pastime. More than five hundred and thirty thousand Californians are licensed to sell real estate—which means that a group the size of Fresno and Santa Cruz combined roams the region chirping, "Sorry we couldn't get better weather for you!" Larry Moore, a leading broker in the South Bay, says, "In Rochester, where I'm from, you buy a house to keep the weather off. Here you buy a house to make money. My mom was telling me, 'They're building all these huge houses for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in Rochester—who can afford that?' I didn't want to say, 'Mom, in Beverly Hills they pay that for a *car*.' "

Eight of the nation's top fifteen subprime lenders were based in Southern California; between 1997 and 2006, as housing prices in the state more than tripled, loan money sloshed into houses and then out for Escalades and Jet Skis. In 2006, two out of five first-time home buyers in California put no money down, relying on a variety of "loan products" whose nicknames foretold trouble, at least in retrospect: "liar loans"; "piggyback loans"; "neg am loans"; "Ninja loans" (No Income, No Job or Assets); and "exploding" or "suicide" loans.

The correction has been severe. Sixty per cent of the homes sold in California in January had been foreclosed in the previous twelve months, and banks, which traditionally lost about thirty per cent of their investment when they sold a foreclosed home in the state, are now losing sixty-five to seventy per cent. "The banks are in the toughest position you could imagine," Jeff Lovato, an asset manager handling foreclosures for several banks, says. "The amounts they're losing are beyond comprehension, but if they cut prices ruthlessly they'll lose even more. It's just a big tangled mess."

One of Nordine's R.E.O. competitors predicts that the willingness of banks to flood the market with problematic and even illegal properties—ones with termites, non-low-flow toilets, illegal garages, lead paint, and plumbing stripped by scavengers—"could create civil unrest in certain areas, a separation of classes, societal chaos." But, he announces cheerfully, "I'm making a million-five and enjoying it. Someone's got to do it, do the bad work, the ugly work. And, hey, that's us. We're doing good in bad times."

Even on weekends, Leo Nordine has a staff of up to ten working from an office in his house in Hermosa Beach, a four-million-dollar modernist basilica of poured-in-place concrete and ipe wood, where he lives with his wife, Molly, and their seven-year-old son, Nate. There is so much to do, even within Nordine's well-organized system—posting task-completion forms online for asset managers, updating the listings on Nordine's Web site, fielding offers, and shepherding contracts into escrow—that two people work in Nate's bedroom, and on occasion the office toilet becomes a desk. Nordine's house is forty yards from the beach, and Hermosa Beach is known as the beach-volleyball capital of the world, yet Nordine rarely leaves his tiny annex, adjacent to the office, to observe the frolic. He makes it a point to start work before and finish after everyone else, with time off only to help Nate with his homework and to run Nate's tortoise, Cornelius, up to the roof to bask.



*"If you won't ask him for directions, I will."*

"My assistant used to work for Leo, and I asked her what kind of tricks he has, what kind of secrets," Atul Anand, one of several local R.E.O. brokers who have regularly sought Nordine's counsel, says. "She said, 'Here's the difference between Leo and everybody else: he works *until*.' " (The chief complaint about Nordine is that he can get too busy. "I had a couple of properties with Leo that busted because he had too much volume," Jeff Lovato says. "He couldn't take care of them properly.") Nordine sits barefoot on a saddle chair surrounded on three sides by a mahogany credenza, facing a wall that's blank except for two small surfing photographs and a few notes scrawled to himself at 2 A.M., when he thinks best. As the day progresses, Nordine pulls files from the drawers behind him and scrawls instructions in red pen on the blizzard of phone messages and printed-out e-mails his assistants drop off at one end of the credenza; gradually, he begins leaving the drawers open until he is closed in entirely.

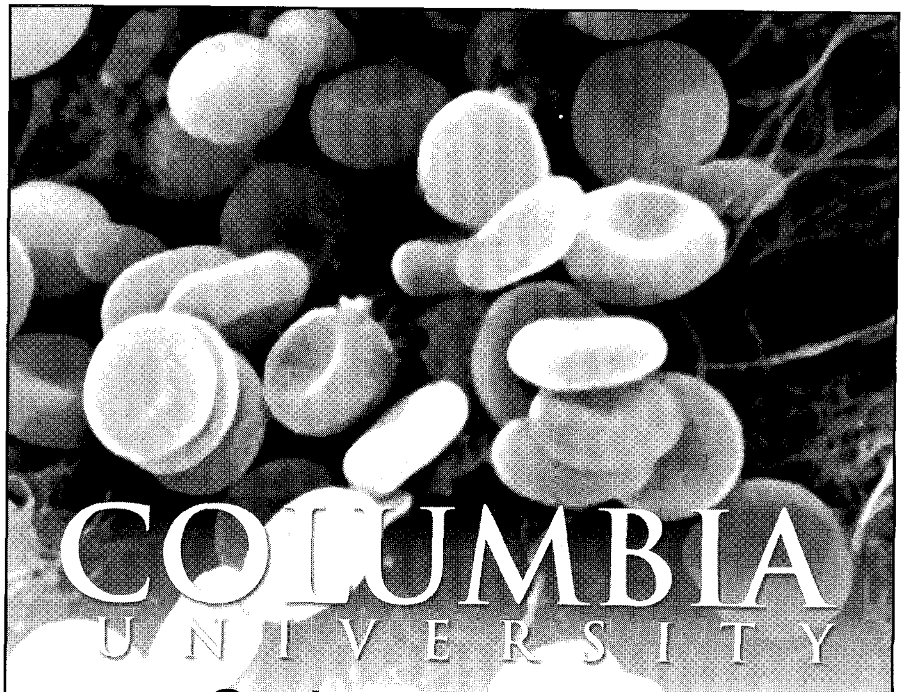
The plunging market has increased the pressure on the R.E.O. broker's first task with a new listing: determining whether the owner, or a tenant, is still living at the property and, if so, offering him "cash for keys," known as C.F.K., to vacate fast. Tracking down an owner is often a chore. Before turning to threats and weapons, the doctor in Burbank tried the standard tactics of ducking phone calls and knocks on the door, and the less standard taping of a pink sheet across his bedroom window. Often, the R.E.O. broker is the first bank representative a homeowner has spoken with since signing his mortgage, which was then bundled with others and "securitized" into an alphabet soup of bonds and other investment vehicles, such as A.B.S.s, M.B.S.s, and S.I.V.s—a market that has now collapsed. "A lot of times, the borrower can't tell who the real mortgage-holder is," Nordine says. "You could have taken out a mortgage with Wells Fargo that somehow ended up at Deutsche Bank, which controls these securitized whatevers but is using another firm as an asset manager—I don't really understand it. We stopped working with Ocwen, in Florida, because it'd outsourced some of its asset managers to Mumbai. They must not have foreclosures in India, because they didn’t know what they were doing.”

Most R.E.O. brokers, when they finally reach the borrower, tactfully allude to “this unfortunate situation,” warn that an eviction cripples a person’s credit, and conclude, “Let’s be gentlemen about this.” Then they offer between a third and a half of what the bank has authorized for C.F.K. (often about one per cent of the outstanding loan), hoping to haggle toward a swift, peaceful, mutually profitable departure. R.E.O. brokers earn a two- to three-per-cent commission on sales but can lose a listing if an eviction drags on.

Nordine’s approach is unusual, yet it works thirty per cent of the time. He offers the C.F.K. amount up front, and presents the borrower’s options candidly. “Hey, Charles,” he said one morning. “I’m the Realtor for the bank. They foreclosed, so you have two options. You can let EMC evict you, which will take four to six months.” (EMC is the mortgage-servicing arm of Bear Stearns, now owned by JPMorgan Chase.) “The other option is what they call cash for keys. If you can be out of the house in thirty days, and leave it clean, they can offer you up to four thousand dollars.” He listened. “Makes more sense to stay and ride it out, huh? O.K., good luck.” He glugged from a bottle of kefir, a fermented-milk drink, and said, “Charles has that inertia thing in his voice; you can tell he’s got an old car out front with weeds growing through it. And C.F.K. doesn’t make sense for him, really. Six months rent-free is worth at least nine thousand.”

On another call, Nordine said, “Hi, Bonnie, just checking in—you guys still living there? It’s been eight months, so all your prayers are coming true!” He laughed. “You’ve got all the time in the world, as far as I’m concerned.” Afterward, he explained, “She’s a pastor who got foreclosed in South L.A.—it’s *freaky* how many religious people get foreclosed—and she told me, ‘You have to pray for me for a long eviction.’ She’s an old lady, and could be her husband died. Lots of old ladies with sad stories. But I don’t pray.”

Nordine seeks to cultivate a fragile karma in these glimmering relationships, believing that he will do well by doing good. Likewise, he doesn’t distribute little envelopes to get work. “We have about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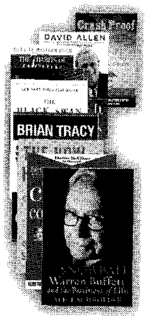
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twenty properties with Leo," an asset manager named Jeff Bourke says, "and a big part of the reason is he's never tried what so many agents do to get listings: offer you meals, floor seats for the Lakers, cash kickbacks."

Yet the job conspires against your self-image. After visiting the house in South Gate, Nordine called the evicted owner, Alicia Gonzalez, and told her that she couldn't remove her possessions from the house until she repaid her renter, Carmen Cordera. "She started crying, and was all embarrassed and sad," Nordine told me, sympathetically. Gonzalez told me that her lawyer had planned to sue the bank for problems in the loan document, but had filed her bankruptcy papers too late—after the lockout. She acknowledged that she hadn't made the precariousness of her situation entirely clear to her renter, but said that she had subsequently given Cordera back her security deposit and that Cordera owed her for the utilities. "I was sure B.K."—bankruptcy—"would make me able to keep the house," she explained. "So I tried to help Carmen and help myself." In early March, the finances between Gonzalez and Cordera still hadn't been definitively worked out, but Nordine told Gonzalez to remove her property from the house anyway so he could start showing it. "I tried to fix things," he said. "But I don't have the leeway with the bank to drag it out."

He was even more troubled when he finally reached an elusive tenant at a South Los Angeles duplex, after the eviction, to ask if he wanted to retrieve his possessions. The tenant, Robert Wilson, who is sixty-seven, told Nordine that he'd set a court date to contest the eviction. Then, finding himself locked out, he'd broken in and got his clothes. He offered to pay for the doors and locks he'd jimmied. "That's O.K.," Nordine said. "Do you need to get back in to pick up anything else?"

"Well, I left my icebox and my fan," Wilson said. "But I guess I don't need them, because now I'm homeless."

Even when he's selling a "dog" of a house, Nordine finds some feature to highlight in his listing: "hardwood floors" or a "raised foundation." "A lot of brokers are lazy," he says. "They show one photo and write, 'Close to schools and shopping.' Well, duh, you're in L.A., man—*everything* is close to schools and shopping, that's all we have around here." Nordine specifies what the property most recently sold for—often double and sometimes triple the current price—and emphasizes that it's bank-owned. "Some banks don't want that on there, because they think the buyer will want a better deal, but that's exactly the reason to put it on," he says. "So the buyer will know it's going to be cheap."

Certain properties defy his descriptive powers. At one house he checked up on, in a hardscrabble region of San Pedro, his "Nordine Realtors" sign and the lockbox with the key to the outside gate were both gone. Nordine hopped the gate in one fluid move—it took me three crablike maneuvers—and cautiously eased in the front door. When people move out in a hurry, they leave things: shotguns, condoms, blood, dead cats, live pit bulls, booby traps, even, once, a baby in a carrying seat.

Dank, cold, and scabbed with black graffiti, the house was empty except for forty-ounce Miller bottles filled with dubious fluids, some tipped out in damp cockroach havens. It looked like a great place to kill yourself and not be found for a month. "This bank won't even pay a couple of hundred bucks to trash the place out, and they price too high—two hundred and fifty-nine!" Nordine said. "Can you even believe someone paid five hundred and fifty for this in 2005?" He walked outside to where his sign had stood. "This house really needs a sign," he said. "At least then, when the house burns down or hookers start moving in, there's someone for the neighbors to call."

Back in the Prius, he said, "I'm sure our listing says something like 'Lots of rooms, two-car garage, close to the harbor.' It probably doesn't say 'Ugliest piece of crap in my inventory.' The bank's going to kill us on this, chasing the market down. The house'll eventually sell as an investment, but the price won't get low enough fast enough for *me* to sell it, because this particular asset manager reassigns after four months." Two weeks later, Nordine got an offer for $170,00, which he urged the bank to take. The bank eventually countered at $255,000—which Nordine called "laughable"—and the buyer walked. The price is now $229,900 and sinking.

As he buzzed through traffic, he said, "We're locked in here in L.A., so there will always be some kind of market. It's wide-open land that scares me. You buy a tract in the Inland Empire"—the largely exurban desert to the east, where Nordine refuses to take listings—"and someone can always build a newer, cheaper tract right next door." Halted by a bottleneck on the 710 freeway, he squirmed like a small child at the opera, then, when the jam cleared after thirty seconds, floored it to ninety and whooped, "I'm free!"

At dinner with his family at Sashi Sushi, a restaurant in Manhattan Beach, Nordine recalled that he'd known his wife, Molly, since elementary school. "Mol was the second-hottest girl in her class," he said.

"Filter!" Molly Nordine said. "You have no filter."

Their son Nate's eyes filled with tears. A sweet boy who wears a gray watch cap everywhere, he was trying to participate in the conversation, but the spicy edamame was burning his mouth. After Nate went home with his nanny, Nordine seemed to lose interest in the meal. "I'd rather spend three hundred nights in a row with Nate than two hundred and ninety-nine with Nate and one night with friends," he said later. "I know there's something wrong with me."

Nordine's parents separated when he was five, by which time he was already making his own mac-and-cheese dinners. He then lived in a series of poky apartments with his mother, his sister, and his mother's ashtrays full of Winstons. By the age of ten, he was working as a paperboy, making seven dollars a week. One day, his father, an insurance agent, came by and borrowed all of Leo's savings, about two hundred dollars, and never repaid him. When Nordine was seventeen, he moved into a trailer that he parked in the driveway of his girlfriend, Lisa Marshall. "I wanted to live in a place without smoking and drinking and fighting, a place that was clean," he said.

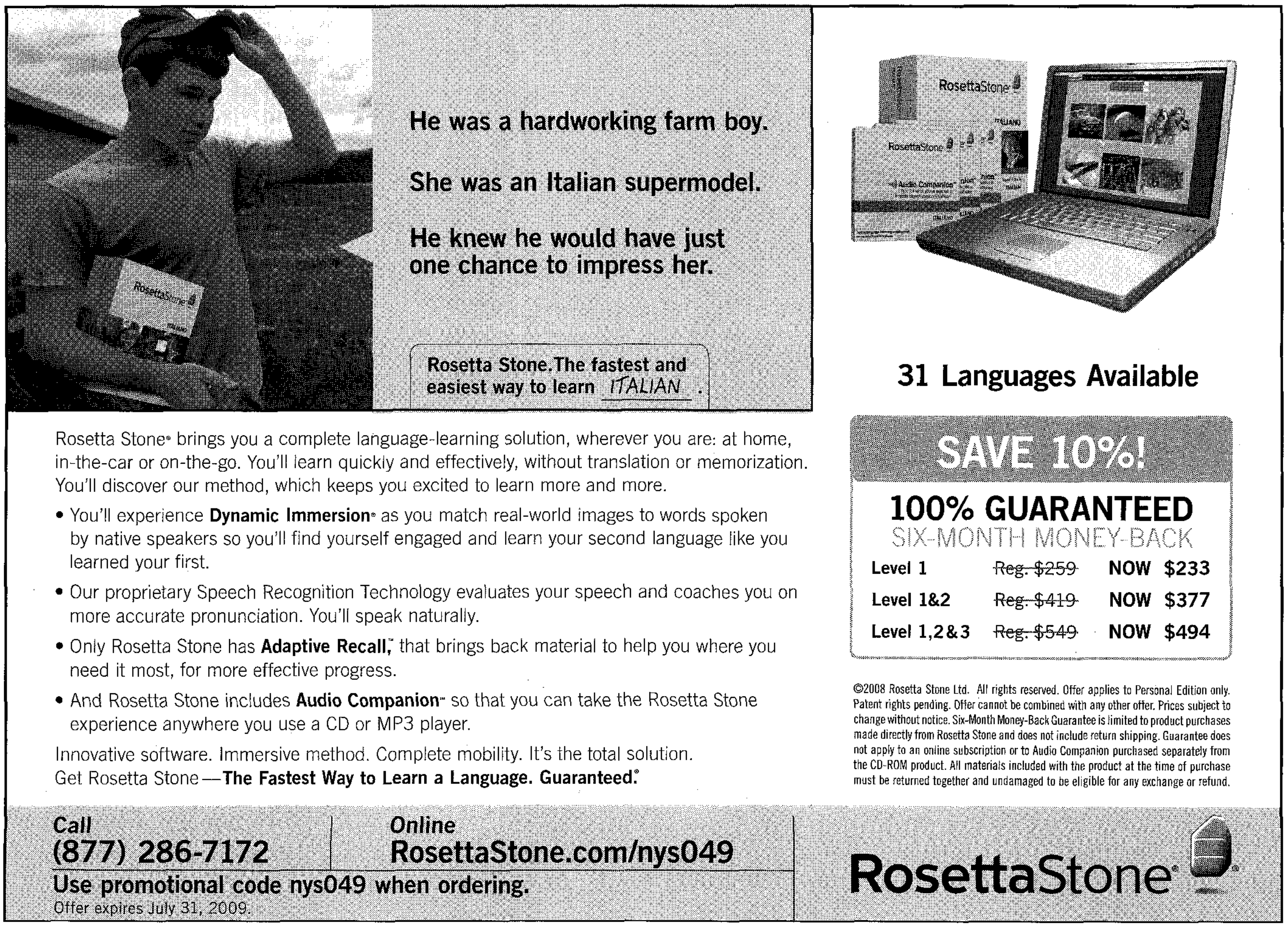
Nordine and Marshall married in 1984. Three years later, inspired by a scene in the film "The Falcon and the Snowman" in which the mother of Sean Penn's character trills, "Woo-hoo! I've got a house to show!," Nordine became a real-estate broker and bought a used Mercedes suitable for the role. He made half a million dollars his second year and became known as Wonder Boy; he also got overextended. Marshall, who is now a real-estate broker herself, says, "I was really scared by the jump to buying a $1.2-million house across from one of Leo's favorite surf spots in Palos Verdes—and then an *additional* house nearby, for a million dollars, but Leo said, 'Don't be a wuss.' " He worked so hard that a fellow-agent, Robbie Mills, remembers thinking when Lisa got pregnant that it must have happened by fax. The Nordines soon had two children, Ashlee and Mike, but, Marshall says, "if any of us wanted to see Leo, we had to go meet him at work."

Marshall left with the children in 1990, just as the housing market was beginning a long swoon. Nordine sold both houses and moved into a tiny apartment on the beach above Redondo Pier. He bought a big bag of oranges and a big bag of potatoes, slept on the floor, and started an R.E.O. business, determined to clear his hundred and sixty thousand dollars of debt. In R.E.O., you could make a lot of money, and success derived from your system and your attention to detail; you didn't have to charm clients. "All I did was work—I'd wake up at 2 A.M. and go back to the office," he says. "It was like I wanted to lose my mind in work, I was so mad. It was like I wanted pain."

When Molly Baltimore began to date Nordine, she felt that she and her family were rescuing him. "He was so isolated he didn't even want to celebrate Christmas," she recalls. They were married in 1992, and she manages his escrows, as Marshall did. Nordine says, "I didn't want to have another kid until I was really sure it was going to work out, so Molly was on probation for, like, twelve years."

At Sashi Sushi, Nordine picked at the Dungeness crab. "You know," he said, "my father killed himself jumping off Redondo Pier"—on Valentine's Day, 2002—"and a crab fisherman pulled him up in his net. He couldn't do it off his pier, in Manhattan Beach; he had to do it off mine. The police called me at work to come down and identify the body, and after I got off the phone I dialled the next bank. Everyone was looking at me like I was crazy, but I wasn't that close to him." Nordine continued, "He left everything to his girlfriend, but he said if I wanted to I could buy his car, some Camry." Nordine laughed. "When I was eating Alpo, he was going to Europe on vacation. So, after he jumped, that night Mol and I went to a sushi place and I saw crab on the menu, which I'd never had, and I decided to try it. I was thinking, Maybe my dad was in this same net."

The first ripple of foreclosures hit the flippers, and the second hit those with adjustable-rate mortgages that spiked upward after two years (the "exploding" loans). Then came the big roller: in October, as the Washingon *Post* reported, "the number of prime mortgages in delinquency exceeded the subprime loans in danger of default." Borrowers with good credit who were significantly "underwater" on their mortgages—owing more than their house was now



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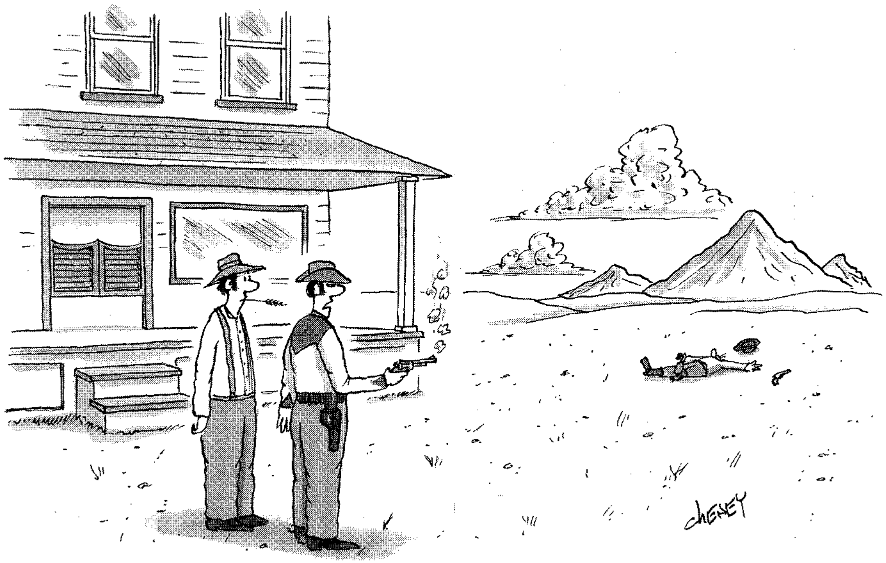

*"That's the last time he'll disseminate disparaging remarks and slanderous disinformation through out-of-context misquoting in this town."*

• •

worth—had begun to default on their payments or even to "buy and bail," purchasing a newly cheap house nearby and walking away from their old one.

Squatters, long common in dicey areas—the telltale shopping cart out front, the kited electric wire swooping through the window—appeared in better neighborhoods. A four-unit building on La Brea in the Mid-City region of Los Angeles was empty when Nordine took possession of it, in March, 2008; then a man who Nordine and his field reps believed was Nigerian moved in and managed to insert himself into the chain of title (even awarding himself a $1.425-million refinancing loan). He kept rekeying the locks behind Nordine's locksmiths and erasing the apartment numbers when Nordine's field reps spray-painted them on. Then he contested the notice of eviction, so when sheriff's deputies performed the lockout, on January 15th, they let him stay. When Nordine's field rep, Richard Contreras, asked the Nigerian to identify himself, he indignantly declared that he was Leo Nordine.

Evictions were getting uglier. Contreras stopped introducing himself as the bank's representative, which infuriated borrowers, and began saying that he represented Leo Nordine, Realtor. When Contreras shot photographs of a property in Long Beach, the owner, who hadn't yet been evicted, lowered his pants in the doorway and said, "Take a picture of this, motherfucker!" So Contreras did. Later, the man tried to set fire to the building; his girlfriend stamped it out. And, when the locksmith came to change the locks, the girlfriend subsequently told Contreras, the couple sat with a shotgun poised, "ready to blow the dude away" if he came through the door.

When Nordine visited their apartment one morning, it was filled with trash so profuse and amorphous that you had to squint to distinguish its components. "The white redneck owners are the worst—the crazy, snapped, I'm-not-leaving, these-colors-don't-bleed ones," Nordine said. "They're the ones who threaten to shoot us, or sue us, and who leave rancid food in the sink. The ones who don't speak English are the best, because sometimes they're illegal and they don't want more trouble." He nudged at a pile with his sneaker. "Dolls, bears, and ammo—you gotta bring a psychologist to this one." Then he touched a pink baby seat and murmured, "They had a kid here, in this."

Floyd Bradford, another of Nordine's field reps, says the neighbors told him that the man's sister had lived with them until she committed suicide. Some time after that, child services had taken her daughter away. After being evicted, the couple were living in a camper in the parking lot of a nearby Rite Aid. Eventually, they'd move on. "Before, when we foreclosed, people would have an apartment to move into," Bradford says. "Now they just sort of disappear."

In January, Philip Wegener, a well-to-do innovator in the R.E.O. industry, called Nordine to propose a joint venture syndicating Nordine's system in cities nationwide. In the nineties, Nordine had done so well selling properties for Wegener's asset-management company that Wegener sent him and his family on a Hawaiian vacation. "I was thinking on the McDonald's model," Wegener told me. "A Big Mac tastes like a Big Mac across the country, and we'd do R.E.O. sales, Leo's way, across the country." Wegener continued his coaxing calls into March, saying, "Not since the Great Depression have we had this kind of opportunity!" But Nordine finally declined, telling me, "I could positively make it work, and make ten times as much money. But I wouldn't surf as good, I'd get fat, my kid would be pissed off at me, and I'd get some weird tumor and die."

Instead of becoming nationally synonymous with foreclosure, Nordine cultivated his own garden in Compton. One of his properties there, a pink stucco two-bedroom, stood open to the winds; a blue van in the yard had been stripped so thoroughly that it was no longer blue, or a van. "Our gardener is supposed to take care of this, but our gardener is scared of Compton," Nordine said. "Our gardener is fired." A makeshift memorial stood inside the front gate: dead flowers, a plush toy dog, a baby rattle. "This is one where someone was murdered, which never helps it sell," he added. Squatters had been here for a time; the toilet was caked with dried feces and the kitchen had been plundered. "We recommend boarding houses in this area—it's only fifteen hundred dollars—but this bank sells everything as is." The walls were tattooed with Magic Marker testimonials: "Ernesto Hernandez, Jr., aka 'El Gordo' + 'Pooh Bear' died 6:58 a.m." On November 28th, the renter and her family moved to their new home, while twenty-two-year-old Hernandez, one of her eight children, had stayed behind to burn trash. For reasons unknown, he was shot in the yard the following morning.

Nordine went back outside and admired an avocado tree. There's always something. "We offered the tenant two grand in C.F.K. in August, and she didn't take it," he said.

"If the bank had offered her a lot more, say five thousand, and she'd taken it, then the house wouldn't have dropped fifty grand in value in six months. Not to mention that her kid would still be alive."

He drove to the building on La Brea where the Nigerian had moved in, saying, "Let's see what my cousin Leo Nordine is up to." He tried his master key in the massive driveway gate, to no avail, then went around to the side and scaled a six-foot wall. When I joined him, I saw two old Mercedeses behind the gate. Nordine knocked on the door of the front unit, waited, then knocked again. A voice issued through the window grille: "Who are you?"

"Leo Nordine. I'm the Realtor for the bank."

"How did you get into my property, Leo Nordine?" The voice was low and calm.

"I hopped the wall. Are the other units vacant?"

"You *hopped the wall.* And you expect me to answer your questions. Is it O.K. to break the law, Leo Nordine?"

"I'm not breaking the law, sir. The bank owns the property, and it's my duty to inspect it."

"Is it O.K. if I come to *your* house and hop the wall?"

"Sure!" Nordine said.

"What bank is it you say you represent?"

"Bayview. They're located in Florida, and they own this property."

"A bank in Florida, called Bayview, owns this house in the middle of Los Angeles?" There was a worldly chuckle. "There is no bank called Bayview."

Nordine murmured, "He might be right, by this point." He walked around back and the man came out to observe: a smaller, older figure than his voice suggested, wearing a black sports coat and plastic sandals. Nordine tried his key in the second unit, then said, "You rekeyed all of them?"

The man pulled out his cell phone. "I am calling the police."

"That's a great idea," Nordine said. "Call the police, and let's all show our I.D.s."

The man looked back stonily. Nordine walked out front again and wrote down the Mercedeses' plate numbers. "This matter has nothing to do with the automobiles," the man said.

"Now I can find out your name," Nordine said. "And I will."

"Einstein," the man said. "If you come back, be prepared for the consequences, Einstein."

Nordine sighed. "Is there any way we can start over? I'm trying not to fight with you. If you're nice, I have the authority to pay you three thousand dollars to leave."

"To leave my property? On which you are trespassing?"

"O.K.," Nordine said. "See you at the lockout."

"Ooh! Now you hop back over the wall. Hop, hop!"

In the car, Nordine said, "That guy wrote the book on how to avoid a foreclosure—he picked the perfect house, behind a fortress gate, and he's hopped from unit to unit for eight months. Brilliant move. I just hope he doesn't rent the other units out, or do something really innovative." (The Nigerian's lawyer says that his client continues to assert that he is the property's owner. In March, deputies finally evicted the man, after a standoff, and Nordine's locksmith, who was kept waiting most of the day, charged him fifteen hundred dollars to rekey all the units—an amount that Nordine was sure would get him fired when the asset manager saw the bill. By the next day, the Nigerian had moved back in.)

Nordine began driving faster, hunched up with the seat-belt alarm bonging, and said, "All this just makes me more convinced about my new idea." A few days earlier, he'd inspected a McMansion in Manhattan Beach that the bank had repossessed from a former Los Angeles Laker. The yard was overgrown, but otherwise the house was in perfect shape—a yuppie's dream of cherry cabinets, vaulted ceilings, and slab granite. And the Laker had left the key in the mailbox. "It's the kind of house I hate, but some sapling will pay nearly two million for it," Nordine said. "We listed it Friday night and by 8 A.M. Saturday we had an offer." That night, he'd woken up at 2 A.M. and scrawled on his legal pad, "New focus, high end, quality, not quantity."

Now, driving home, he said, "On a one-hundred-thousand-dollar house, we net one thousand dollars and one hundred headaches. Whereas on a one- or two-million-dollar house we can make some real money. The foreclosure business goes in waves, and now the next wave is heading west to hit the rich folks in Manhattan Beach." He shrugged, almost apologetically. "I'm just riding it." ♦

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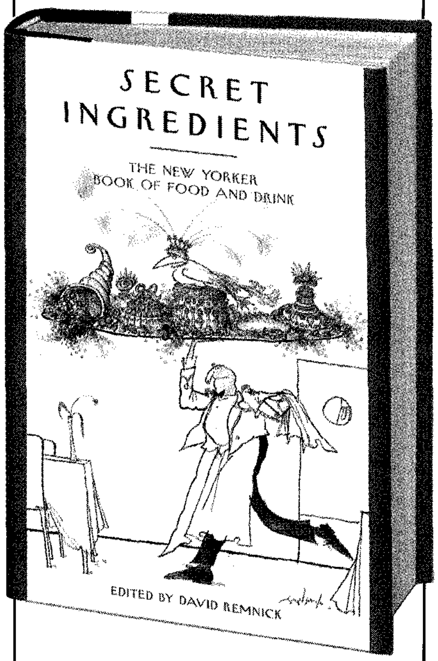

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# COUPLET

*A tale of twin poets.*

BY REBECCA MEAD

One August afternoon, Michael and Matthew Dickman boarded a bus in Lents, the working-class neighborhood in southeast Portland, Oregon, where they grew up. Michael, who is six feet one and a half inches, with pale, freckled skin, sandy hair, and blue-green eyes behind glasses, and who was wearing a frayed blue shirt and a blue sun hat, slid into a seat toward the back of the bus. Matthew, who is six feet two, with pale, freckled skin, sandy hair, and blue-green eyes behind glasses, and who was wearing a black T-shirt, sank into a seat close by. It was hot outside, and the bus, which was headed downtown, offered refuge from the arid intersection where they had been waiting: Ninety-second and Foster, where a junk-filled antique store with "Closing Down" signs in its windows faced off against the New Copper Penny, an establishment that offered ladies' nights, and was considerably more tarnished than its name suggested.

The bus had barely swung into traffic when a stocky woman in shorts, with stringy, bleached hair, got up from her seat and stumbled toward Michael, clutching a Big Gulp. "I'm sorry to bother you," she said, grasping a pole near Michael for support. "But are you guys twins?"

It is a question that the Dickmans are used to hearing, though it seems to be asked ritualistically, rather than in a genuine spirit of inquiry: the brothers, who are thirty-three, are each other's double, but for that half inch in height, and for slight, shifting distinctions in body weight, haircut, and eyewear. (Matthew currently favors glasses with squared-off black rims; Michael's glasses, which have dark-brown rims, are marginally more ovoid.)

"You're so cute!" the woman on the bus said, gazing at the brothers.

"He's cuter," Matthew replied, with practiced graciousness.

Eventually, the woman returned to her seat, and started discussing twins with the driver. "They're telepathic, you know," she said. Several other passengers turned to assess the brothers, who bore the scrutiny of delighted strangers with the resigned equanimity typically shown by famous actors who have forgone Bel Air sequestration.

Michael and Matthew Dickman are poets, and though the subject matter of each is varied, they often draw from a similar well of images and experiences: the rough neighborhood of their youth, with its violent fathers, beleaguered mothers, and reckless, neglected kids. Their verse, though, is strikingly different. Michael's poems are interior, fragmentary, and austere, often stripped down to single-word lines; they seethe with incipient violence. Matthew's are effusive, ecstatic, and all-embracing, spilling over with pop-cultural references and exuberant carnality. "Kings," which appears in Michael Dickman's first collection, "The End of the West," just published by Copper Canyon, describes the twins' contemporaries in Lents, exalted and downtrodden:

They used to be good at being alive,
    pointing their index fingers at
        the trees, passing
        invisible sentences
            proclamations

knighting the birds
one by one

All down my street the new fathers
beat the kingness
out
of the
kings

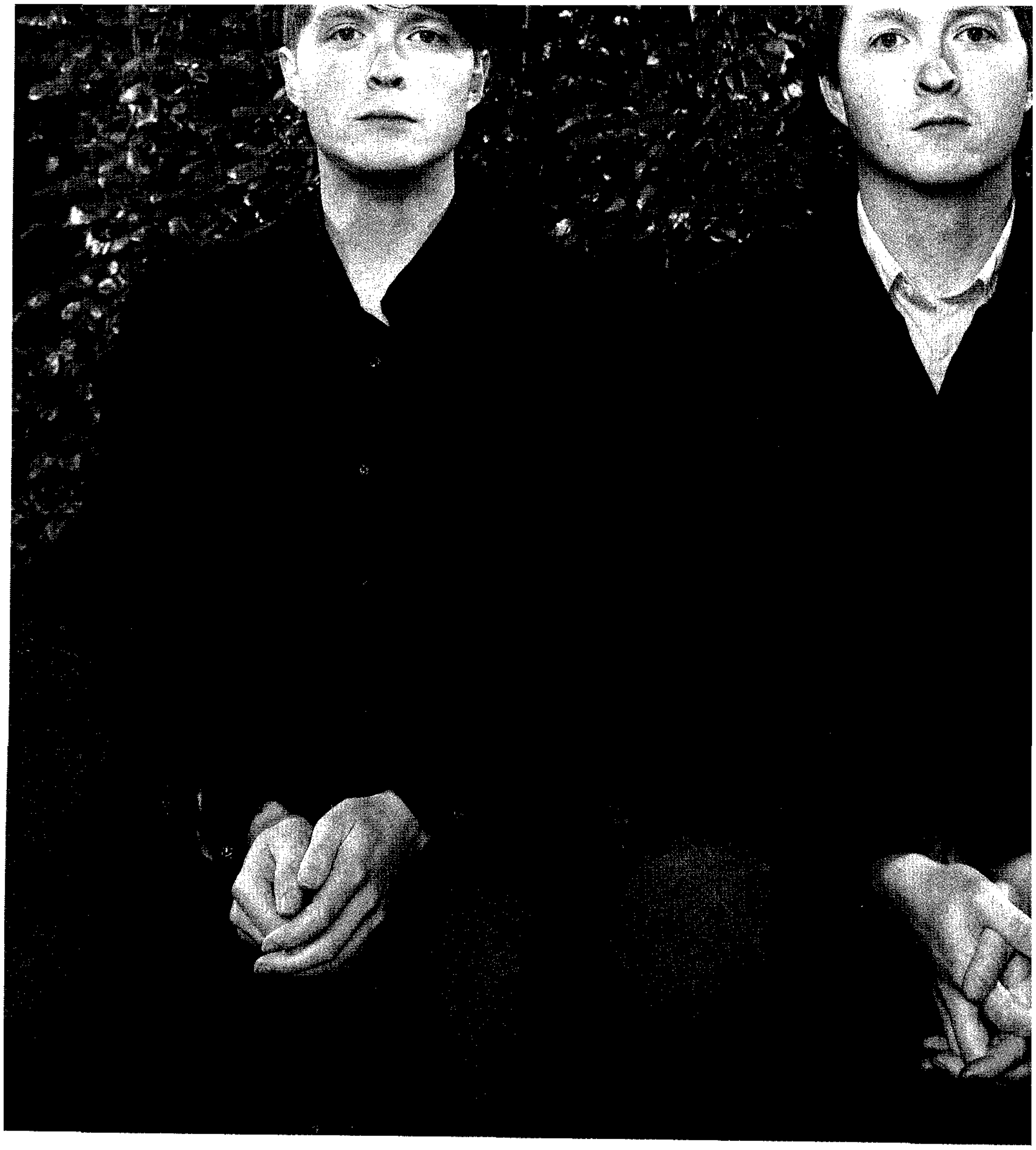
In "Lents District," which appears in "All-American Poem," a collection published this past fall, Matthew Dickman also memorializes the neighborhood:

Dear Lents, dear 82nd avenue, dear 92nd
    and Foster,
I am your strange son.
You saved me when I needed saving,
your arms wrapped around
my bassinet like patrol cars wrapped
    around
the school yard
the night Jason went crazy—
waving his father's gun above his head,
bathed in red and blue flashing lights,
all-American, broken in half and beautiful.

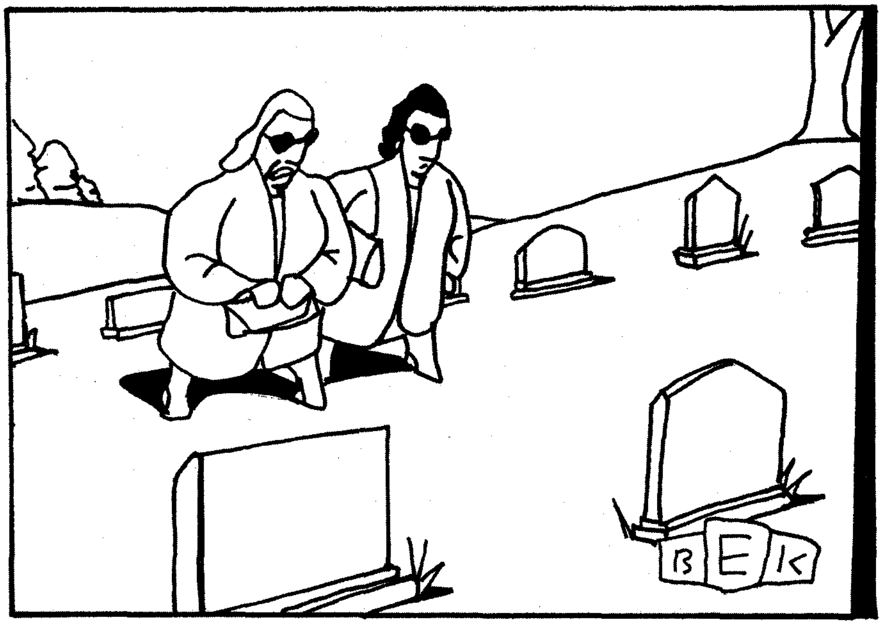
In Michael's poems, a lot of things are described as dead: a cigar, hair, friends. In Matthew's poems, hurried sexual encounters upstairs at parties recur. ("And probably not with the same girl," Carl Adamshick, another Portland poet and a friend of the brothers, says.) Reading Michael is like stepping out of an overheated apartment building to be met, unexpectedly, by an exhilaratingly chill gust of wind; reading Matthew is like taking a deep, warm bath with a glass of wine balanced on the soap dish. "There's something of the pugilist in Michael," Major Jackson, another poet friend of the brothers, says. "There is something hard-edged and tough about the speakers in his poems. Matthew has such a big heart; he has very lush, surprising turns in his work." The poet Dorianne Laux, who has been a mentor to both Dickmans, says, "Michael is a Nureyev—each movement is articulated—but Matthew is a whirling dervish."

The Dickmans' swift and simultaneous rise has aroused suspicion in some circles. "Shoveling pop culture references into sloppy lines does not transform your poems into Frank O'Hara's," Michael Schiavo, a young poet and blogger, wrote of "All-American Poem," in a disparaging post six thousand words in length. Schiavo also declared that "the Dickman twins have put their life story, not their poetry, front and center, have made *that* the reason you should find them interesting."

In fact, the Dickman twins have made efforts to resist the pairing of their work, as does Michael Wiegers, the executive editor of Copper Canyon: Wiegers accepted Michael's manuscript without knowing anything of Matthew, and initially opposed handling Matthew's book,



*Matthew and Michael Dickman. When the poems are read together, their resonance is amplified. Pl*



*"I never got a chance to say 'Shut up.'"*

because, as he told me, "Somebody might see that as our attempt to try to make a circus act out of them." It was only after Michael's work had been accepted by Copper Canyon that Matthew discovered that his own manuscript had won the A.P.R./Honickman First Book Prize, the reward for which was publication by the *American Poetry Review*—with distribution through Copper Canyon.

The Dickman brothers' poems bear reading independently, but, together, the resonance of the work is amplified. Just as Frank McCourt and Malachy McCourt, in their separate memoirs, put forth a tragic and a comic interpretation of their family drama, and Tobias Wolff and Geoffrey Wolff provide overlapping portraits of their separated parents in "This Boy's Life" and "The Duke of Deception," the Dickman brothers offer two strong perspectives on a shared experience, even though it would be reductive to read either's poems as frankly confessional or purely autobiographical. "It is shocking to people when they realize that I am almost always sleeping alone, and leaving parties alone," Matthew told me, though to spend a couple of days walking around the streets of Portland with him is to witness his being greeted by—and grasping to recall the name of—more than one young woman upon whom he seems to have made an impression. (Michael, by far the less social Dickman, is often greeted with similar enthusiasm by strangers, until he identifies himself merely as the brother of Matthew.)

Unlike the McCourts or the Wolffs, of course, Michael and Matthew share more than the same raw material; they share the same genetic material. Although there is a rich body of scientific literature on the subject of identical twins who have been separated at birth—their circumstances help to illuminate the competing influences of genetics and environment on the development of an individual's health and sensibility—the Dickman twins, who were raised together and have been close their entire lives, seem to offer a parallel experiment. One way of looking at their work—Michael's Dickinsonian severity, and Matthew's Whitmanesque expansiveness—is as an illustration of the distinctiveness of imagination, even in two people who are as alike as two people can be.

One evening not long ago, after Matthew got out of work, the brothers met at Cassidy's, a bar in downtown Portland. Matthew works at Whole Foods, behind the prepared-foods counter, where he earns eleven dollars an hour; Michael has a job as a prep cook at a restaurant across town, making nine-fifty an hour. The brothers got their first jobs the summer that they turned thirteen, working for a butcher in a local grocery store. "He would tell us how to clean the deboning knife with this machine, and he was also very interested in counselling us about relationships with girls—he would be spraying bits of body and blood, and explaining how you have sex," Matthew recalls. ("When you cry like that you sound like meat being tenderized by hand," Michael's poem "Ode" begins.) Ever since, through high school and college and beyond, the brothers have supported themselves with food-service jobs. Both have only recently moved back to Portland: Michael from Ann Arbor, where his girlfriend, Phoebe Nobles, had attended graduate school; Matthew from Hudson, New York, where he'd been living with a now ex-girlfriend.

The Dickmans had gone to Cassidy's to work on some poems. Each is the other's first and best reader. "Because he's my brother, and because of the relationship we have, he doesn't feel that he is going to hurt my feelings," Michael explained. "And he's read all my stuff. He has a sense of trajectory." Matthew said, "His fingerprints are all over my poems. And because we know each other's work so much, and have seen it change so much, we can call each other out on something that might seem really great to someone else but is actually old hat." Each is also the other's most ardent advocate. "When I read his poems, there is nothing else I want to write but his poems," Matthew said. "I think, What am I doing with my life? Michael's poems have that strange, wonderful voice." Michael, for his part, will not appear after Matthew at a poetry reading, "It would be like Cream following Jimi Hendrix," he told me. "Reading Matthew is like listening to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers—wild, colorful, fast. And, if he says that reading mine is like listening to Arvo Pärt, punch him in the nose."

Over beers at the bar, Michael read aloud one of his new poems—spare, disconcerting lines suffused with a piteous sense of loss: "All my snowy friends / piled up inside my bedroom / extinct and smiling / packing ice beneath / my eyes." Afterward, Matthew took the manuscript and began scribbling on the page. " 'All my snowy friends'—that's so beautiful," he said. "But this 'I wanted to beat the shit out of everyone'—the word 'shit,' or 'beating the shit,' has too much resonance with other poems of yours."

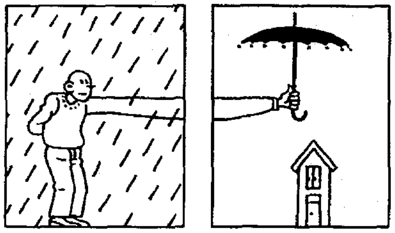
They turned to a poem of Matthew's, a barroom narrative describing a late-night encounter with a pretty, idiotic girl: "The woman sitting next to me calls herself Summer / and keeps touching her lips / and scratching her thigh / and ordering a martini / and talking about history." Michael said, " 'The hem of her dress'—that's sort of like the 'beat the shit out of' in my poem. I was just reading this interview with Mark Strand, and he says you should be very suspect of clusters of words. If a cluster of words comes at you, it was probably written by someone else, and if it wasn't written by someone else it was probably already written by you."

Michael stepped away to make a phone call, and a heavily pregnant waitress came by. "Excuse me, but are you guys twins?" she said, explaining that she was expecting twin boys in a few months. She was favoring the names Desmond and Davis. "Maybe—just to throw this out?—another two names that would be great are Michael and Matthew," Matthew offered, with a twinkling smile.

Michael and Matthew's mother, Wendy Dickman, didn't realize that she was carrying twins until she had a sonogram a week before she was due to give birth. Hysterical, she told her doctor that she was paying for only one birth and taking only one baby home. "Wendy, you only have to pay for one, but you have to take them both," the doctor gently told her. The boys were born by Cesarean section, Michael two minutes before Matthew, on August 20, 1975. Wendy, who was twenty-nine and unmarried, had become pregnant during a brief relationship, and the boys' father, Allen Hull, was already gone by the time she brought them home, although he did live nearby. ("I was born after a long night of Black Russians and Canasta," Matthew writes in a poem called "Love.") "It was difficult," Wendy told me. "Matthew would be in the bassinet crying in the living room, Michael in the crib in the bedroom crying, and I would be on the front porch, crying."

The boys shared a made-up baby language until they were weaned off it, on the advice of their pediatrician, and maintained an unusual sympathy of experience. "If Michael had an ache in his left ear, Matthew had an ache in his left ear," Wendy said. "If Michael had a cavity, Matthew had a cavity in the same spot. Once, Matthew was playing at the elementary school across the street, and Michael and I were in the house, and Michael started crying and saying, 'I am hurt, Mommy.' The school caretaker came across and told me that Matthew had been hurt playing on a jungle gym." In later years, the brothers started calling each other by the same nickname, which they still use: Pig, which they adopted after reading "Lord of the Flies," whose final chapter ends with Ralph recalling the "fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy." Even so, the differences in their personalities started to emerge early: Michael was more analytical, whereas Matthew was more driven by emotions. Although they were born just two minutes apart, Michael, whose name Wendy had mulled over for months before his birth, was cast as the older sibling, especially in the eyes of Matthew, whose name she'd come up with at the last minute. "Michael was logical, sequential, and a little bolder," Wendy said. "He would go down the slide, whereas Matthew would kind of look at the slide and assess, and, if his brother did a good job, he might try."

They lived in a small, low house, with a maple tree in the front yard and a dusty park a short walk away. Wendy and a female friend had bought it a couple of years before the boys were born, and the friend moved out when the boys were eighteen months old. ("We'd decided that whoever got married first would move out and the other would get to keep the house," Wendy told me.) The boys' half sister, Elizabeth, was born when they were four. (Now twenty-nine, she is studying for a master's degree in social work.) Lents, which was originally a farming community that was annexed to Portland in 1912, was until the early seventies a blue-collar neighborhood of single-family homes, with its own commercial center and a distinct, small-town character. Things started to change in 1975, with the construction of Interstate 205: the freeway sliced the neighborhood in two, requiring the demolition of five hundred houses, and seeding strip joints and bars along Foster Avenue.



As the boys grew older, Lents declined. There were drugs and gangs, including the Gypsy Jokers bikers, who had a clubhouse a couple of blocks from the Dickmans' home. Asian immigrants began moving into the area in the nineties, and there was a concurrent rise in the skinhead population. In a poem called "For Ian Sullivan Upon Joining the South-Side White Pride," Matthew writes, "What our neighborhood lacked in compassion / it made up for in baseball bats and chain link / fences. Asian mini-marts and your parents' rage / swelling inside your chest like someone pumping / up a basketball."

Wendy Dickman told me, "I didn't know the changes were going to happen. We had these wonderful neighbors, but I didn't realize what was there if you went outside our block. I would drive to work, come back, and park my car in the driveway, and I rarely walked anywhere. The boys did a lot of walking, and they were exposed to things that I wasn't." The exposure wasn't just in the streets; it was in the homes of their friends. In a poem called "Some of the Men," Michael writes:

Look at
Josh's father—

Stumbling into the bedroom at three
in the morning the two of us asleep
and all that moonlight
and beat his son's
head against

the headboard

*You fucker you fucker you asked for it*

The moon

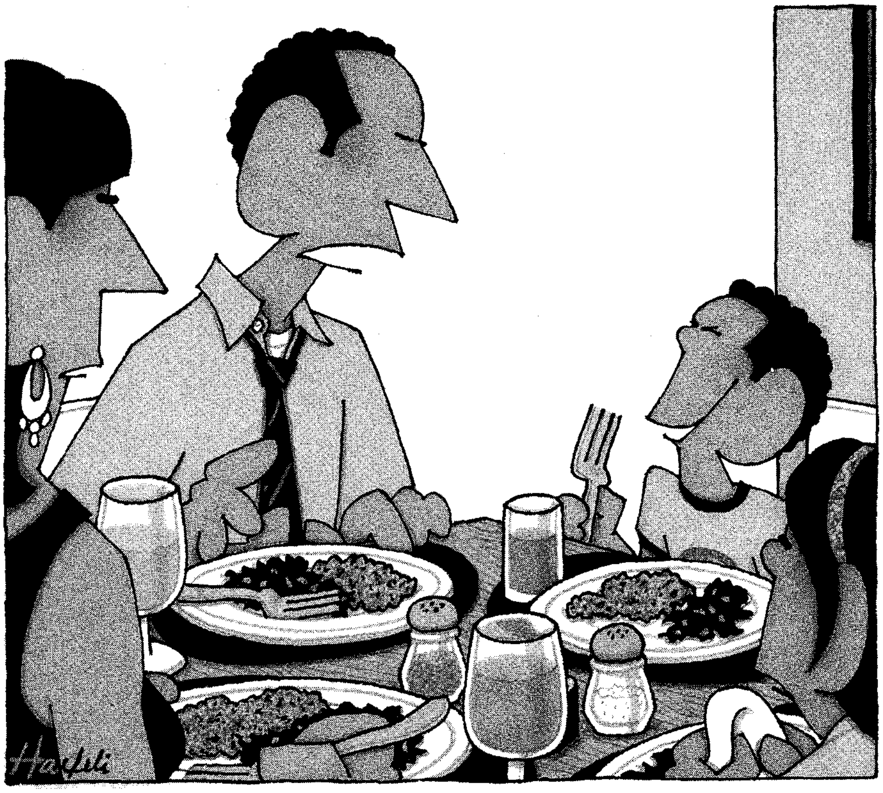
His jaw splashed across the pillowcase.

Wendy Dickman had spent much of her childhood in far more affluent circumstances. Her father had died when she was a young girl, and her mother had remarried a wealthier man, the vice-president of a steel company in the San Francisco Bay Area, where Wendy moved with her mother from Portland. "The most valuable lesson I learned there was that money doesn't really buy happiness or build character," she told me. "Those were defining years in how I decided to raise my own family." ("For a long time my grandfather / tried to kill anyone / who came near him / Wives / Daughters / Stepdaughters," Michael writes in "Some of the Men.")

Wendy's stepfather was also the father of Sharon Olds, the poet. During the Dickmans' adolescence, Olds became an intermittent presence—although her books, in which she draws on her troubled relationship with her father, were off limits. "She wanted us to have our own experience of her father as our grandfather," Matthew says. "I know the stories—that he was a fierce alcoholic who did cruel things to his kids and wives. But we also knew him as a sober man who taught us to swim, and magically made us peanut butter and lemonade." Michael and Matthew have strived to avoid taking nepotistic advantage of their relation to Olds, and have preferred to conceal it—Michael told a professor at college of the connection only after his class was assigned a weeklong study of an Olds poem and he had to excuse himself, on the ground that it was about his grandfather. Both brothers grant, however, that having a poet in the family may have helped them think that a poet was something that one could become.

Wendy did not want to ask her family for financial help, and patched together jobs—she worked in customer service for the telephone company, and wrote policies for an insurance firm, where she is still employed—as well as sometimes resorting to public assistance. "When I was out of money, we would play the 'cupboard game'—looking in the cupboard and making dinner out of what we found," Wendy says.

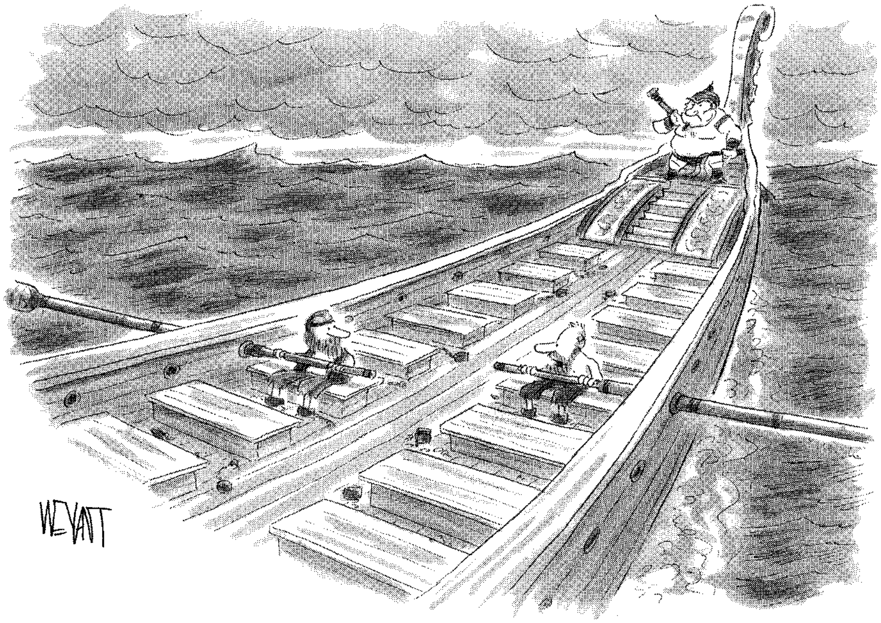
At first, the boys were enrolled in the elementary school across the street from their house, but their mother withdrew them after they started to complain of stomach aches. "I went to speak to the principal, and as I was walking over there this little five-year-old boy outside the school looked at me and said, 'Fuck you,'" Wendy says. "I looked at him and said, 'Thank you, because you just helped me to make a decision.'" Thereafter, the brothers attended a succession of private Catholic schools from which their mother managed to wrestle scholarships. (Wendy was herself Episcopalian.) "We were fiercely picked on," Matthew said. "We were weird; we were twins; we had these government-issue glasses; and our last name had the words 'dick' and 'man' in it. So we came home crying a lot of the time."



*"Humor should be employed to defuse tension, not create it."*

Although they went across town for school, they hung out in the neighborhood with a crowd of skateboarders whose homes were considerably less secure than their own. "My mom created a very safe place in what ended up being a fairly rough neighborhood," Michael says. "Our friends loved to come over. There was food, even if at times it was bread and gravy and rice. No one was drunk out of their minds beating anybody." Even so, the brothers' antics were riskier than their mother knew at the time. They started drinking at twelve, and went to parties at which gang members shot off guns in the street outside. Still, they observed limits. "I always had the sense that, if Matthew or I were drunk, Wendy could deal with it, or, if we got kicked out of school for a week for having some acid, she could deal with it," Michael says. "But there were some things—heroin, meth—there was no dealing with this." Some of their friends were less restrained. In a poem called "Scary Parents," Michael writes, "I didn't shoot heroin in the eighth grade because I was afraid of / needles and still am / My friends couldn't / *not* do it— / Black tar / a leather belt / and sunlight."

Their own father, although mostly absent, did bequeath them one important legacy: an older half brother and half sister, to whose mother he had earlier been married. Darin Hull, who was six years the twins' senior, often went to watch their baseball games, and he became an idolized figure, although he eventually developed drug and alcohol problems. He died of an overdose two years ago. ("My brother opened / thirteen Fentanyl patches and stuck them on his body / until it wasn't his body anymore," Matthew writes in a poem called "Trouble.") Dana Huddleston, who was eleven years older than they



*"At this point, I'm just happy to still have a job."*

• •

were, became a frequent babysitter. "The bond between them is stronger than anything I have seen," Huddleston says. "They used to wake up having the same nightmare. They would be yelling the same thing, both sitting up in bed crying."

"Dana and Darin were incredibly important," Michael says. "They were the first people who explained to me that parents could be nuts sometimes, and you didn't have to do everything that they wanted you to do as a result."

Sometimes their father would make an awkward appearance. "He would come by for birthdays and things, but it was usually a disaster," Michael says. "The year we turned thirteen was a big deal," Matthew says. "I remember he bought us alarm clocks, and took us to the zoo. At the time, we were skateboarders. My head was shaved, except for long bangs, and Michael's hair looked like someone had literally put a bowl on his head and shaved all around it. So going to the zoo was kind of strange." The last of the birthday outings, Matthew recalls, was when they were seventeen. "I had been doing coke all night, and I got home and found that we had to go and have lunch with our father," he says. "It was a really strange lunch. He brought a couple of flyers about how he thought we should go in the military." (The Dickmans' father now lives in Sisters, a small town in central Oregon. They last saw him at Darin's funeral.)

The brothers' more ill-advised adventures have entered their personal mythology, if not always their poetry, and when they took me for a walk around their old neighborhood—four years ago, their mother moved to a suburb north of Portland—they pointed out, with some embarrassment, the walls they had daubed with graffiti, the schoolyard where they had skateboarded, and the park where they had received a city-funded free lunch on summer afternoons. "It was over here where we shot off your friend's .45," Matthew said, as we walked past the worn grass of the playing fields.

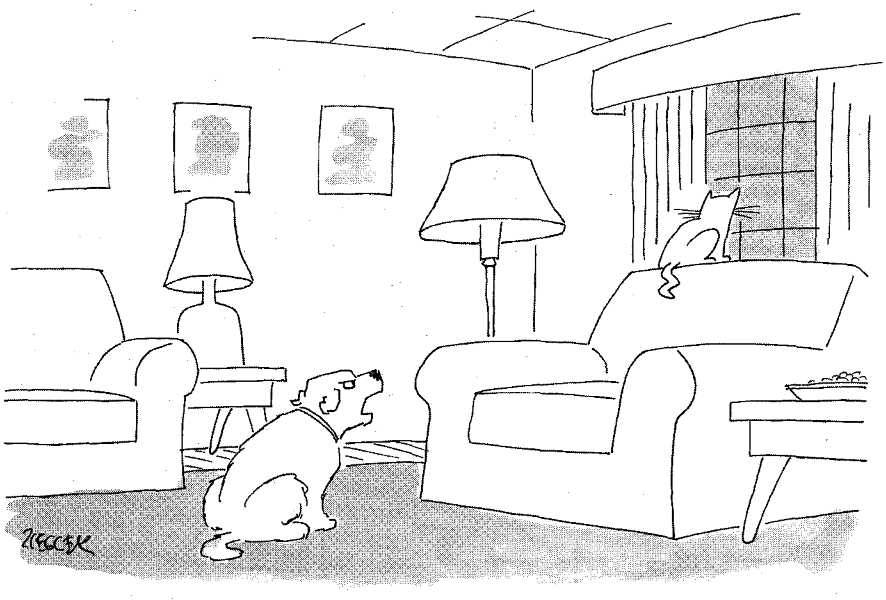
"I don't think it was a .45—that would have sent me back, like, ten feet," Michael replied. "It was a smaller handgun. Nobody got hurt. I remember that it was really scary. We weren't, I think, very tough. We hated all that stuff. We were so happy to find books."

"And lucky," Matthew said.

In high school, the twins were "very confident, and very interesting for their age—there was a certain amount of maturity, or should I say sophistication," Ernie Casciato, their English teacher, who became a mentor, says. They were also reliably bad students, and on one occasion they took advantage of the frequent confusion of their identities by splitting their subjects between them while preparing for their final exams, so that Michael took the history and biology tests twice, and Matthew sat for English twice.

During those years, they started to write poems. "Michael had developed a crush on this girl, who gave him a book of Pablo Neruda poems," Matthew recalls. "She was a junior and we were sophomores. I also met someone older than me, and she was reading Anne Sexton. We both wanted them to take their shirts off and kiss us, and we decided that if we wrote poems that might help us in our venture." Michael says, "I got the Neruda book, 'The Captain's Verses,' and I didn't look at it for ages, and then I thought, I had better read this, because then I could talk to her about these poems. And I read them, and it was an unbelievable experience. I read it over and over, and I was in tears. I could not figure out what was happening. I had no idea that anyone could say things in this way."

They would bring their compositions to Casciato to read. "It was always about love," he told me. "I would say, 'You can write about something else once in a while—there's flowers, and trees, and rivers. There are feelings that you have other than that.' But that was the major stuff: love, and the pursuit thereof." (When Casciato acquired his first computer, the brothers used their talents on his behalf, conducting a chat-room conversation with a woman who later became Casciato's wife—as if they were dual, freckle-nosed Cyranos de Bergerac.) Casciato was also the school drama teacher, and in that department the twins excelled; their mother had put them in after-school acting classes before they turned ten. Casciato cast them in a school production of "Tartuffe"—Matthew was Tartuffe, Michael was Orgon—and they played Mechanicals in a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in Portland's "Shakespeare in the Parks." "They had, for their age, very few inhibitions," Casciato told me. "They fed off each other.



*"Look. They say sit, you sit. They say roll over, you roll over. Where's the prob?"*

They thought alike, they acted alike."

As teen-agers, they began loitering for hours at Powell's Books, the vast emporium that has helped make Portland's literary culture more highly developed than that of much larger American cities. They forged the habit, as yet unbroken, of deliberately misplacing volumes that they wanted to buy but couldn't immediately afford, in the hope of retrieving them later. By the time they left high school, they were both obsessed with contemporary poetry: Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Louise Glück, Philip Levine—also a twin—and Charles Bukowski. "Reading Bukowski was, like, 'Wow, you can write about anything,' " Matthew said. "I didn't identify with, but I recognized, the type of masculinity in those poems—the injured, desperate bravado."

After high school, Michael enrolled at Portland State University, where he studied creative writing and theatre; Matthew spent four years at Portland Community College, where he also did a lot of acting, before eventually graduating, in 2001, from the University of Oregon. They applied to creative-writing programs, and went to the only one that accepted both of them: the University of Texas at Austin. They continued to be involved in theatre, and in the mid-nineties they appeared in a small independent movie called "Anoosh of the Airwaves." In it, they had to enact a fistfight. "There was a stunt guy there to plan it all out, and we said, 'You know, we've done this before,' " Michael says. Afterward, they briefly signed up with a talent agency, in the hope of getting work in commercials.

Some years later, they received a call from a casting director in Hollywood, Denise Chamian, who was looking for twin brothers to appear in Steven Spielberg's movie "Minority Report." Michael and Matthew were cast as the "precogs"—identical twin brothers who are able to foresee crimes before they happen. "I was searching for twins all over the country, and we needed a very specific look, and they were perfect, look-wise," Chamian told me. "They were very pale, and kind of unearthly looking—people who looked like they had not been out in the sun much in their life." The roles were not particularly demanding artistically, though they were physically: the Dickmans were required to have their heads and eyebrows shaved and to lie, muttering, in a vat of warm water with their skulls wired up. "It was the best job for poetry ever," Michael says. "Whenever we weren't actually shooting, we would be in our trailers, reading Ted Hughes, and then we would leave and take cabs to bookstores and spend our per diem on poetry. On our days off, we would make coffee in one of our hotel rooms and write poetry all day."

Even with such unusual opportunities, it became clear to both brothers that acting would have to become secondary to writing. "To be an actor takes up a lot of the same stuff as if you were going to try to make writing, and I couldn't figure out how to do both," Michael says. "Poetry just occupied my thoughts more." They submitted poems to journals, and applied for fellowships—often the same ones, which occasionally resulted in some uncomfortable competition, such as when Matthew was accepted to the Fine Arts Work Center, in Provincetown, Massachusetts. "He was going to go to Cape Cod and hang out for two months," Michael recalls. "He had got this great news, and I kept waiting for my phone to ring—shouldn't they call *me* now, like they just called him? And they weren't going to call, and they didn't. But our work is so different that if they gave it to him they weren't going to give it to me: 'Sorry, we don't like your stupid, spooky, lots-of-white-space poems; we like his intense, celebratory thing.' " (Michael reapplied the next year, and got the fellowship that time around.)

The Dickmans became assiduous about seeking out writing mentors, among them Dorianne Laux, whom they first met in the late nineties. "I was teaching at the University of Oregon, and they made a phone call and asked if they could come and take me to lunch and talk about the program," she says. "We ended up spending hours talking about poetry. They were incredibly passionate about it." The poet Joseph Millar, who is married to Laux, says, "They talked about poetry the way that young people used to speak about rock and roll, or surfing, or cars. The enthusiasm was not the intellectual enthusiasm of a professor or a critic. It is the enthusiasm of a practitioner." One of Laux's poems, "Savages," was inspired by the way the brothers and a couple of their poet friends would sprawl in the stacks at Powell's: "They buy poetry like gang members / buy guns—for aperture, caliber / heft and defense." Later, Michael found another mentor in Denis Johnson, the poet and novelist, who taught him in a class at the University of Texas; he sometimes visits Johnson at his home in Idaho, where for fun they shoot at trees with semi-automatic rifles.

"To some extent, they are Artful Dodgers," Major Jackson, who met the brothers while Matthew was at the University of Oregon, says of the Dickmans. "They know how to surround themselves with people who have enormous hearts and generosity and are enthusiastic about art and literature and music." One of the more artful dodges in Matthew's career happened at the age of eighteen, when he met Allen Ginsberg, who was appearing at Powell's. "He is signing this pile of books, and he looks up at me and he says, 'How's your love life?' " Matthew recalls. Matthew fled in embarrassment, only to return a little later. "I went right up to him and I said, 'I'm sorry, how's *your* love life?' And he sort of smiles and he says, 'I'm really old; my love life is what it is.' I said, 'Well, I can't promise you anything, but would you like to meet my twin brother?' And of course this poor man says, 'Yes, I would *love* to meet your twin brother.' " Ginsberg joined the brothers for tea, and the next evening took Matthew to dinner. "After dinner, I decided the game was sort of up, and I said, 'I just want you to know that I am not going to sleep with you, but it's early enough in the evening that if you want to find someone else I don't mind leaving,' " Matthew recalls. "He laughed and said, 'No, I am having a good time. Why don't we just go to my hotel room and visit.' So we went up to his hotel room, and he orders a gin-and-tonic for me, and I am sitting there smoking Export 'A' cigarettes and eating chocolates that have been left on his pillow, and he and I have this incredible conversation about poetry."

Eventually, Ginsberg said that it was time to go to sleep. "He wrote down his address in New York, and he gave me a couple of poems that he had been writing drafts of, and he sat down on his bed," Matthew told me. "And I sat down on his bed next to him and just told him how wonderful it had been, and thanked him. And then I thought, This is ridiculous, and I turned in and kissed him, and we kissed for probably fifteen minutes. And it was so sweet and wonderful, like kissing a mushy orange."

In "Slow Dance," a funny, romantic, erotic, and unreservedly sentimental poem of Matthew's that has proved such a favorite at readings that he feels almost obliged to retire it—"I don't want it to be my 'Free Bird,' " he says—he describes the "slow dance of siblings":

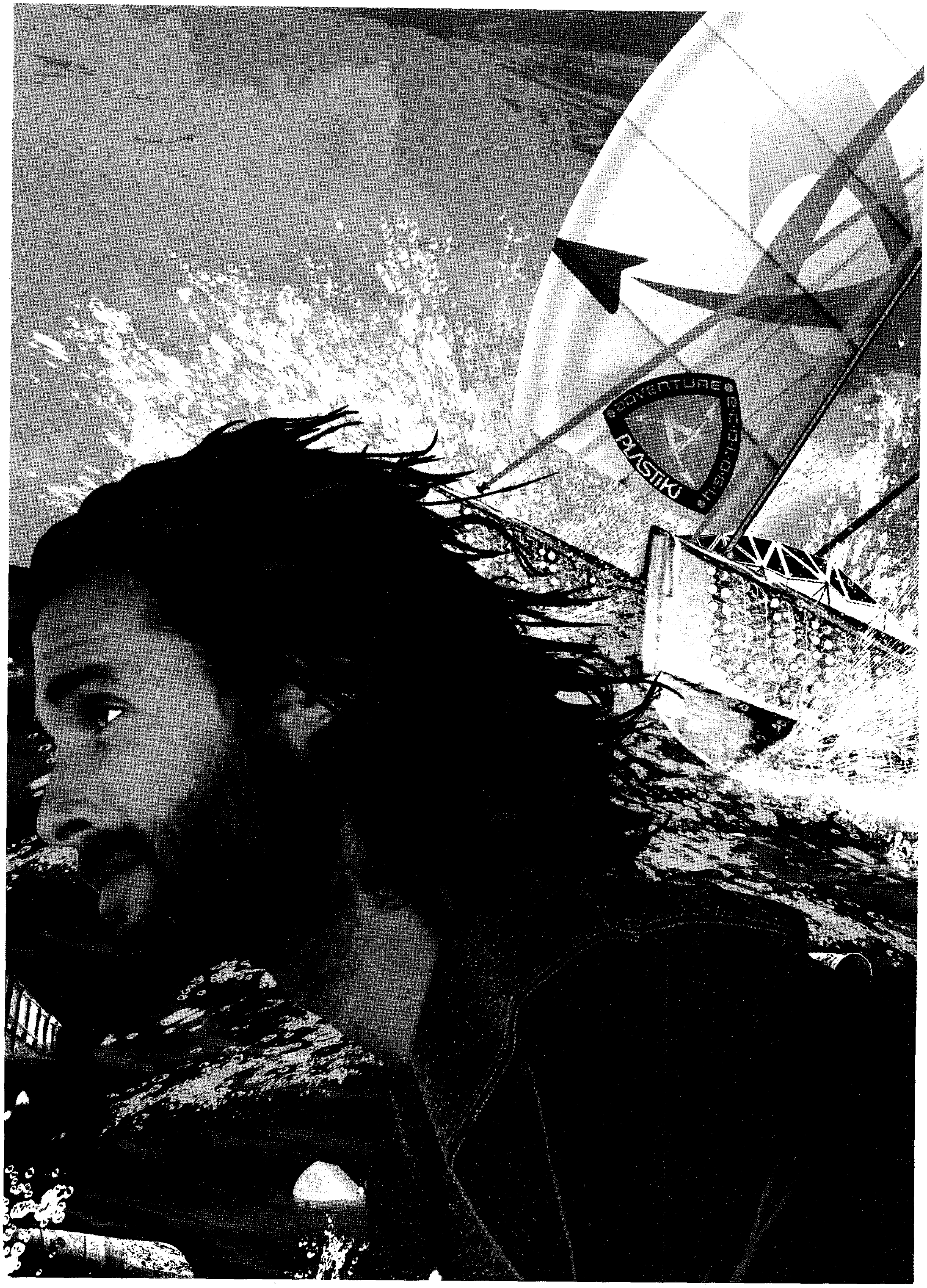
> Two men in the middle of the room.
>   When I dance with him,
> one of my great loves, he is absolutely
>   human,
> and when he turns to dip me
> or I step on his foot because we are both
>   leading,
> I know that one of us will die first and
>   the other will suffer.

Matthew told me he first realized that his brother's mortality was separate from his own during a visit to a relative who was dying in the hospital, when the twins were about thirteen. A nurse came to draw blood, and Michael fainted, cracking his head on the tile floor; at the sight of his brother's blood, Matthew fainted, too, though his fall was broken by a hospital chair. Matthew was sent home, but Michael was taken to the emergency room. "I remember being terrified that my brother wasn't going to leave the hospital," Matthew says. "But there was part of me that also thought, What would happen to me then?" He hopes that he dies before Michael, he told me: "As unloving as it is, I hope I go first, because I think otherwise I would go a little crazy."

Matthew's work is full of tender images of his brother—"That great and mythic friend of mine, that lucky charm," as he calls him in one poem—and articulates the seductive, mysterious suggestion that twins, through their origin, have special access to the experience of union. "It is a magical thing that they have, and that twins have," Joseph Millar says. "There is a sort of archetypal, mystical quality about it. I am sure it has its drawbacks, but there is a bond between them which is deeper than words, and it is interesting that they have chosen an art form which is often trying to say the unsayable." But if Matthew's work evokes a love forged before the dawning of consciousness, and expresses a striving to replicate that merging in every subsequent encounter—with an erotic partner, or with entire populations—Michael's speaks of the ultimate solitariness of the individual, twin or not. ("I'm not dead but I am / standing very still / in the backyard / staring up at the maple / thirty years ago / a tiny kid waiting on the ground / alone in heaven / in the world / in white sneakers," Michael writes in a poem called "We Did Not Make Ourselves.") Franz Wright, who is a friend and mentor of Michael's, says, "What Michael is tapping into is what everyone secretly feels, which is that they are alien and apart, and have been since childhood. He does it in a way that is very understated, and very moving. He goes into that fear and loneliness and that alienation that originates in childhood, and comes back with comforting news from there." Michael says, "It is amazing that Matthew can write about the two of us dancing at a party—I have never done that, and it has never interested me. The times that family members have come up in my poems, they have their beginnings in people I know, and hopefully it gets much stranger." When I told Michael that Matthew had told me he hopes he dies first, Michael smiled affably and said, "Yeah, he's an asshole."

Not long ago, the brothers were approached by Pablo Van Dijk, the publisher of Kunst Editions, in New York, with a proposal: that each would write a poem for the other about their birth, to be published together in a chapbook, of which only ninety-nine handmade copies would be produced. The poems that the brothers wrote are as unalike as twin poems can be. Matthew's is crowded and rhapsodic, its run-on lines breathlessly merging mother and brother and brother. "Twins floating / in each other's arms / inside her arms. My brother / is being born with me / and so / I have never been alone," it reads. ("It's a love poem—I can't help it," he told me.) Michael struggled to write his contribution to the book. After completing it, he told me, "It was hard to write it and have it be a piece of art, and not a love letter to Matthew, which is something so specific that I wouldn't think it would have worth for other people to read."

Michael, too, has imagined their shared birth, but his poem is just thirteen lines long, each incantatory phrase suspended in white space, carefully set apart from the next, like an unborn child sealed in a bath of amniotic fluid. "The body unfolds and unfolds and makes / a human being," he writes. "Everything I am not / is walking across the room towards me / and looks just like me." Each brother had gone some way toward capturing the mystery that is every child's birth; but together they had given expression to the peculiar, doubled mystery of their own. ♦


ADVENTURE ECOLOGY
PLASTIKI

*De Rothschild's boat, Plastiki, will be made entirely of recyclable plastics, produce its own energy, and generate no noxious emissions.*

## A REPORTER AT LARGE

# MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

*David de Rothschild's oceanic eco-crusade.*

BY JOHN COLAPINTO

One morning last June, David de Rothschild, a thirty-year-old heir to the European banking fortune, arrived on his bicycle at Pier 31, a vast, hangarlike building that juts from the Embarcadero into San Francisco Bay, in the city's North Beach district. De Rothschild, who has a beard and shoulder-length brown hair, was wearing a flower-patterned shirt, low-slung corduroys, a belt with a skull-and-crossbones buckle, and flip-flops. He entered the building and pedalled toward a group of people at the far end of the space: a gray-haired man in a work apron who was cutting wood with a table saw and a younger man and woman who were hunched over a twenty-foot-long, bow-shaped plywood frame, which cradled, in neat rows, under a white nylon fishing net, thousands of clear-plastic water bottles.

For a month, the group had been constructing a prototype for a sixty-foot "bottle boat," which de Rothschild and a small crew plan to sail across the Pacific Ocean, from San Francisco to Sydney, Australia. A highlight of the trip, which de Rothschild hopes will begin in July and, if all goes well, end four months later, will be a visit to a huge region of floating plastic trash and particles, known as the Eastern Garbage Patch. De Rothschild will collect water samples to study and, using a satellite phone, post photographs and video clips on the Web site of Adventure Ecology, an environmental organization that he founded. His goal is to call attention to the perils of ocean pollution and to suggest a solution: waste as a resource. To this end, he had decided that his boat should be made entirely of recyclable plastics, produce its own energy, and generate no noxious emissions. De Rothschild has enlisted twenty-five people to help him realize his vision—consultants to design solar panels, wind turbines, and stationary bikes (to power batteries that would run small motors), along with a system to produce potable water from seawater and a "separating toilet," so that the crew's solid and liquid waste can be converted into fertilizer. The expedition is expected to cost several million dollars, much of which he has raised from corporate partners: the International Watch Company and Hewlett-Packard. Inspired, in part, by Thor Heyerdahl's Pacific crossing in 1947, on a raft called the Kon-Tiki, de Rothschild called his project Plastiki.

As a teen-ager, de Rothschild, who is six feet four, was a top-ranked horse jumper on Britain's Junior Eventing team, and he is an experienced bungee jumper and kite skier. He is also one of just a handful of people to have skied to both the North and South geographic Poles. (These feats earned him inclusion in the National Geographic Society's 2007 class of Emerging Explorers.) But Plastiki is of a different order of difficulty and danger from anything he has attempted before. Storms, sharks, isolation, injury, and illness are standard hazards for anyone attempting a Pacific crossing by sailboat, but de Rothschild is proposing to do it in an experimental craft made from materials that have never been tested against ocean waves. He plans to bring an electronic position-indicating radio beacon and radios that can provide up to forty-eight hours' advance warning of approaching cyclones. Even so, the boat, whose top speed is expected to be about ten knots, and whose steering system will allow only minimal maneuverability, may not be fast enough to dodge a Pacific cyclone, which can measure a thousand miles across.

De Rothschild, arriving at the far end of the pier, hopped off his bike—he does not own a car. (At his home, near London, he uses compact fluorescent light bulbs, buys his electricity from a green supplier, and maintains a colony of earthworms to consume his organic waste. Still, he commutes regularly between Europe and the United States, a habit that he acknowledges is less than ideal for an environmental activist. "My footprint is bigger than average but less than it could be," he says. "I try and take every action I can.") He asked Mike Rose, the man in the apron, how the construction of the Plastiki prototype was going. Rose, an Australian in his fifties who had been hired as the boat's builder, replied that he and his workers were having a "bugger of a time" trying to prevent the bottles from shifting under the nylon fishing net. Any movement, he said, could compromise the boat's shape.

De Rothschild bent down and poked at one of the bottles, which wiggled beneath his finger. The bottle itself, however, felt as hard as a brick, thanks to a technique that a member of de Rothschild's team had devised to enable the thin plastic to withstand the pummelling of the waves. Inside each bottle was some dry-ice powder, which had turned into gas and expanded, pressurizing the bottle. Rose's female worker, a Swedish college student, had spent three days with a couple of helpers putting dry ice into nearly six thousand bottles. (The actual boat will use about twelve thousand.)

"I was talking to Andy," Rose said, referring to Andy Dovell, the naval architect who is Plastiki's designer. "We were talking about the possibility of shrink-wrapping the hulls with Saran Wrap to hold the bottles still."

"It's a thought," de Rothschild said, without enthusiasm. "But then what's the use of having bottles? You could put anything under there."

He stepped through a doorway at the end of the pier and looked broodingly over the bay. The week before, an environmental group called the Algalita Marine Research Foundation—whose founder, Charles Moore, claimed to have discovered the Eastern Garbage Patch, in the late nineties—had launched its own bottle-boat expedition to Hawaii, and also planned to visit the Patch. Algalita's boat, the Junk Raft, consisted of little more than

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RITTER; PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LUCA BABINI

fishing-net pontoons full of unpressurized bottles supporting a platform that held a discarded Cessna fuselage and a sail. The Junk Raft had embarked from Long Beach, California, with a crew of two, its sendoff broadcast on local television.

"That's the competitiveness of these green groups and adventurers," de Rothschild said bitterly. "Because we're competing for corporate sponsors, they nudge in front of you." He was discovering an unsavory truth about environmental activism—the kind that depends on sponsors and publicity to achieve its aims. The jockeying over money, attention, and ideas taints even the most seemingly virtuous projects with vanity and self-promotion. To de Rothschild's irritation, for the past few days prospective sponsors had been calling, asking to know how Plastiki differed from the Junk Raft. To him, the differences were self-evident. "They threw a raft together in a few weeks," he said. "We're building a boat. It's not 'junk'—it's a resource!" He was relieved that Plastiki had already attracted some press attention, but this was also a reminder that the media interest owed as much to his last name as to the project's ingenuity. "Nine out of ten articles about Plastiki will begin 'David, banking this, super-rich that, or family this,'" he complained. "But what hopefully happens is that people, when they dig a little deeper, will see that there's a merit in the content, past just the name."

To de Rothschild's right was the dramatic span of the Bay Bridge; to his left, the outcropping of Alcatraz Island. In August, 2002, when he was twenty-three, he competed in the Escape from the Rock Triathlon—which included a thirteen-mile bicycle ride, a two-and-a-half-mile run, and a one-and-a-half-mile swim, from the prison island to the mainland. De Rothschild crossed the gap, whose swift current is thought to have carried escaping prisoners to their deaths, in forty-six minutes, winning the triathlon in his age group.

He shook off his gloom and smiled. "That's the adventure," he said. "If it was normal or easy, everyone would be out here in a plastic-bottle boat."

De Rothschild may be the latest incarnation of the British adventurer-explorer, a hardy and eccentric breed that includes men like Sir Richard Francis Burton, who travelled vast tracts of Asia and Africa in the eighteen-hundreds, dabbled in hypnotism and alternative medicine, was an expert fencer, and translated "The Arabian Nights" from the original Arabic; and Sebastian Snow, who, in 1951, helped locate the source of the Amazon while touring South America on a balsa-wood raft, singing the "Eton Boating Song." But Snow undertook his explorations largely for his own amusement, and the great Victorian-era explorers typically conducted theirs under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society, an institution with imperialist ambitions. De Rothschild brings to his adventures a twenty-first-century environmental consciousness—a desire to expose the desecration of nature by human beings. "David is someone who could sit back and enjoy what life offers," Terry Garcia, the executive vice-president for Mission Programs at the National Geographic Society, told me. "But, instead, he is daring to voyage across the Pacific to make a point—that humans are trashing the oceans."

De Rothschild's most direct precursor may be Michael Rockefeller, another earnest scion of an eminent family who was drawn to remote corners of the globe. In 1961, Rockefeller, the twenty-three-year-old son of Nelson Rockefeller, visited New Guinea, where he helped film a documentary about indigenous tribes. His catamaran capsized in the Arafura Sea, near the mouth of the Eilanden River, and he is presumed to have drowned or been eaten by cannibals. De Rothschild, however, refuses to dwell on the risks of Plastiki. "Ignorance is bliss in these situations," he says.

Like the Rockefellers, the Rothschilds owe their wealth largely to industrialization. Two hundred years ago, Mayer Amschel Rothschild, who was born in Frankfurt's Jewish ghetto in 1744, was appointed financial overseer to Wilhelm IX. Mayer groomed his five sons to be bankers and dispatched them across Europe to set up businesses in the family name (which acquired regional variations: Rothschild, de Rothschild, von Rothschild). During the nineteenth century, the Rothschilds were perhaps the most influential business family in the world, helping to finance Britain in the Napoleonic Wars and supplying the credit that drove the Industrial Revolution.

David is the youngest of three children of the former Victoria Schott, an American-born interior designer and former fund-raiser for Britain's Conservative Party, and Sir Evelyn de Rothschild, who, until his retirement, in 2003, ran the English branch of the banking empire Rothschild's. David and his older siblings—Jessica, a theatre producer, and Anthony, who heads a music-publishing company—grew up in London and at Ascott House, the family's thirty-two-hundred-acre ancestral estate, in Buckinghamshire. Lady Victoria, who divorced Sir Evelyn in 2000 and now lives in London, says that David was such a hyperactive child that she worried constantly for his safety.

"I finally called my doctor one day and said, 'I need help. I don't know how to control this child,'" Lady Victoria told me. She and Sir Evelyn took him for a psychological evaluation at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. Under the doctor's gaze, David became a passive, obedient child—ignoring an open window ("I had told the doctor, 'He'll run over and try to leap out,'" Lady Victoria said) and playing nicely with a set of bricks ("I'd said, 'He'll knock them off the table'"). After the appointment, he and his mortified parents entered the elevator to return to the lobby. "At which point, David takes both fists and hits every button on the elevator as we go down. I said, 'Oh, you are smart, aren't you?'" Lady Victoria later sought help from a relative, Peter Robeson, an equestrian who had competed in four Olympics. Robeson taught David to show-jump, a highly dangerous sport. (Christopher Reeve became a quadriplegic when his horse missed a jump in one such event.) De Rothschild excelled at the sport and, at fourteen, joined the British Junior Eventing team. He might have been an Olympian himself—several of his teammates went on to compete in the Olympics—but, he says, he "realized there was more to life than spending hours and hours and hours on a horse."

Since 2005, de Rothschild has given dozens of lectures a year on the environment to colleges and businesses, and he always starts his presentations by showing a PowerPoint slide of his dismal elementary-school report cards. "Had I been a kid of 1999 or 2000, I would probably have been stuffed full of Ritalin and put into some program, where I'm told I have hyperactive disorder and A.D.H.D. and hyper-deficit disorder," he told me. He changed prep schools frequently and for a time was home-schooled. As a student at Swanbourne House, a school near his family's country estate, where students were allowed to explore the neighboring fields, de Rothschild persuaded a few classmates to join him in eating what he thought were snap peas growing on a tree. In fact, the plant was an extremely poisonous laburnum. The children ended up in the hospital, where they had their stomachs pumped. "I always attribute my safety-first philosophy to the fact that he is my brother," Anthony, who is nineteen months older than David, told me. "I've spent my entire life going, 'No, don't do that. Don't do that. Don't do that.' "

It hadn't occurred to de Rothschild to join the family banking business, but it was not immediately obvious what he would do instead. After college, he worked for a while at a music-merchandising-and-licensing company and took courses at a school of naturopathic medicine, in London. In 2001, he bought an eleven-hundred-acre organic farm on New Zealand's South Island, near Christchurch, and, two years later, he moved to Sydney. (De Rothschild moved back to London in 2005, though the farm, which produces beef, sheep, herbs, nuts, and honey, is still in operation.)

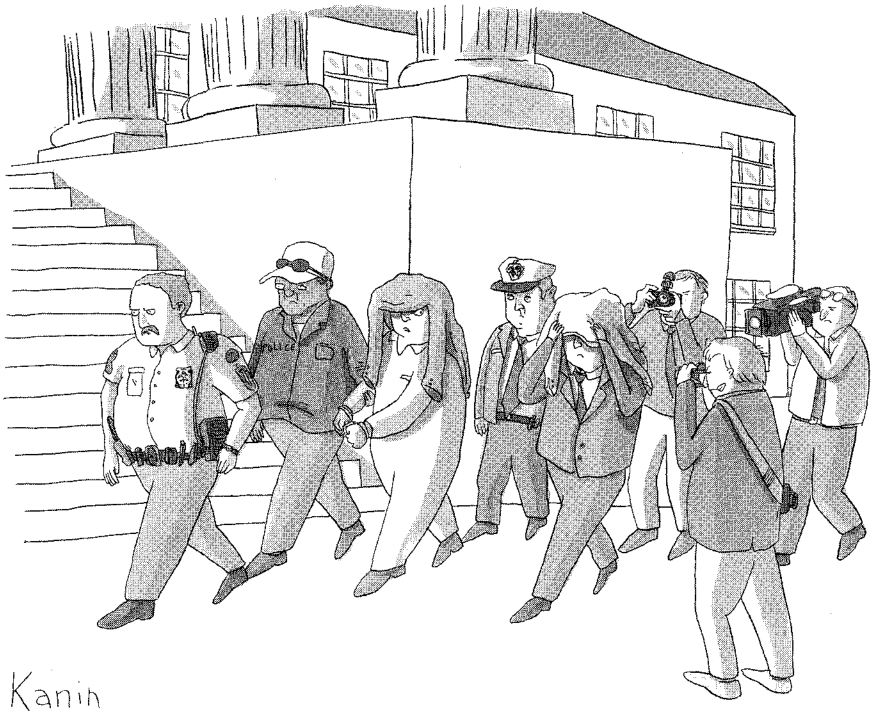
In 2004, de Rothschild undertook his first polar expedition, after learning, on a visit to London that spring, that Patrick Woodhead, the brother of a friend, was organizing the first ever east-to-west traverse of Antarctica by foot, ski, and kite. The trekkers, who planned to cover eleven hundred and fifty miles, in subzero temperatures, needed one more person to complete the team. Woodhead, a professional explorer and the expedition's leader, invited de Rothschild to join the group, despite his lack of experience. "Everyone has to start somewhere," Woodhead says.

De Rothschild thought the trip sounded daunting, "But I was also, like, 'It's skiing. How hard can it be? Yeah, it's cold, but we've got all the equipment.' Slightly naïve, definitely." He called his brother to discuss Woodhead's offer. "I said, 'You said no, right?' " Anthony recalled. "And he said, 'No, I said I was kind of interested.' " By this time, his mother was no longer surprised by such phone calls. "I'd get calls, 'I'm going bungee jumping over Victoria Falls,' " she told me. "And I finally made peace."

The expedition team, which included Paul Landry, a Canadian explorer who had twice been to the South Pole, and Alastair Vere Nicoll, a London lawyer, arrived on the ice of Antarctica on November 1, 2004, in the middle of a whiteout storm, which confined them to their tents for two weeks. When the weather finally cleared, the group began the trek to the Pole—three hundred and forty-five miles. For much of the trip, de Rothschild was in considerable pain. "He damaged his knee the first week, while pulling sleds up this incredibly arduous glacier system called the Axel Hieberg," Woodhead said. "For about ten days, he soldiered on without a word of complaint, despite hardly being able to ski. Also, during the kiting"—the trekkers used kites attached to waist harnesses to pull them on skis, for up to forty hours at a stretch—"he fell into a crevasse and very nearly fell to his death."

"When I got to my tent every night, my feet were shredded to bits, my ankles were hurting, my knee was in pain—I was on Advil every three hours," de Rothschild said. "You forget those things. I felt blessed that I was one of maybe twenty people on the planet, ever—been and gone—to have seen these scenes." The team made it to the Pole in thirty-seven days—a record—and continued on, for twenty-three more days, to the other side of the continent. They finished the journey in late January, after spending more than seventy days on the ice.

Before departing, de Rothschild had spent fifteen hundred dollars on a two-page advertisement in a New Zealand teaching publication that was sent to every secondary school in the country. The ad described the expedition and urged students to learn about Antarctica. (De Rothschild included instructions for how to "build your own Antarctica in your classroom.") When he returned to Australia and logged on to his computer, he found several hundred e-mails from schoolchildren asking about the South Pole and about his next expedition. The outpouring encouraged him to pursue an idea that he had begun contemplating while in Antarctica: an organization that would mix adventure, environmentalism, and education. He imagined conducting expeditions through some of the world's most fragile ecosystems and documenting the trips on an interactive Web



*"You know, it would be encouraging if, as my lawyer, you weren't also doing that."*

site aimed primarily at schoolchildren. De Rothschild called his organization Adventure Ecology, and its first mission, Top of the World, was designed to call attention to the effects of global warming: a crossing with sled dogs and skis of the North Pole, from Cape Artichesky, Russia, to Ellesmere Island, Canada. De Rothschild assembled a four-person team that included Paul Landry, Landry's twenty-year-old daughter, Sarah, and Martin Hartley, a photographer. The group set off on March 3, 2006, accompanied by sixteen Inuit sled dogs pulling two and a half tons of gear and food. De Rothschild brought along a handheld personal computer, on which he wrote blog entries and recorded digital photographs for Adventure Ecology's Web site, sending the material to the company's London office by means of a satellite phone.

At the beginning, de Rothschild and his team faced temperatures of minus thirty degrees Celsius. After three months, as they got closer to Canada, temperatures climbed toward zero, and they were slowed by melting ice, which formed fast-moving channels called "leads." They often crossed the leads by breaking off a huge chunk of ice with snow axes, throwing a rope over the water to the next chunk, and using a pulley system to propel themselves and the dogs across. Eventually, it became too difficult to get the dogs over the leads, and the team decided to have them evacuated. They went on without the dogs, sometimes travelling less than a mile a day. In early June, when they were still a hundred nautical miles from Canada, the melting ice made it impossible to continue. De Rothschild asked the expedition's manager at Adventure Ecology to send a plane. "It was absolutely gutting for David that they had to be evacuated before they finished the expedition," the manager, Katie Ardern, told me. "But, in a way, it also showcased the problems out there—the melting and warming that is happening so much earlier and quicker." In a message that de Rothschild posted after his return, he wrote, "Now that I'm back at home safely it's crystal clear in my mind what I left behind is a rapidly dying ecosystem." The expedition drew almost two million hits on the Adventure Ecology Web site. "E-mails came in from schools all over Canada, Australia, and the U.K., and the number of requests we got for David to talk at schools was amazing," Ardern said. "It really worked."

## TRENCH NAMES

The column, like a snake, winds through the fields,
Scoring the grass with wheels, with heavy wheels
And hooves, and boots. The grass smiles in the sun,
Quite helpless. Orchard and copse are Paradise
Where flowers and fruits grow leisurely, and birds
Rise in the blue, and sing, and sink again
And rest. The woods are ancient. They have names—
Thiepval, deep vale, La Boisselle, Aubépines,
Named long ago by dead men. And their sons
Know trees and creatures, earth and sky, the same.

We gouge out tunnels in the sleeping fields.
We turn the clay and slice the turf, and make
A scheme of cross-roads, orderly and mad,
Under and through, like moles, like monstrous worms.
Dig out our dens, like cicatrices scored
Into the face of earth. And we give names
To our vast network in the roots, imposed,
Imperious, desperate to hide, to hurt.

The sunken roads were numbered at the start.
A chequer board. But men are poets, and names
Are Adam's heritage, and English men
Imposed a ghostly English map on French
Crushed ruined harvests and polluted streams.

So here run Piccadilly, Regent Street,
Oxford Street, Bond Street, Tothill Fields, Tower Bridge,
And Kentish places, Dover, Tunbridge Wells,
Entering wider hauntings, resonant,
The Boggart Hole, Bleak House, Deep Doom and Gloom.

Remembering boyhood, soldier poets recall
The desperate deeds of Lost Boys, Peter Pan,
Hook Copse, and Wendy Cottage. Horrors lurk
In Jekyll Copse and Hyde Copse. Nonsense smiles
As shells and flares disorder tiny lines

Before his evacuation from the North Pole, de Rothschild had started planning his next expedition: a sailing trip that would begin in Beijing, during the 2008 Summer Olympics, and end in London four years later, at the opening of the 2012 Summer Games. He imagined stopping in various ports along his route, on a vessel that would serve as an "education center and aid boat," with doctors on board who would perform simple operations on local people to repair cleft palates and harelips or remove benign facial tumors. Botanists and anthropologists would also come along, to conduct studies of local flora and fauna, and he wanted the boat to have a documentary-film unit, in order to make movies of the expedition. Ultimately, the project was impractical—a rough budget suggested that it would cost tens of millions of dollars, far more than de Rothschild thought he could raise from sponsors—and he abandoned it. But in July, 2006, while he was

In Walrus, Gimble, Mimsy, Borogrove—
Which lead to Dum and Dee and to that Wood
Where fury lurked, and blackness, and that Crow.

There's Dead Man's Dump, Bone Trench and Carrion Trench,
Cemetery Alley, Skull Farm, Suicide Road,
Abuse Trench and Abyss Trench, Cesspool, Sticky Trench,
Slither Trench, Slimy Trench, Slum Trench, Bloody Farm.
Worm Trench, Louse Post, Bug Alley, Old Boot Street.
Gas Alley, Gangrene Alley, Gory Trench.
Dreary, Dredge, Dregs, Drench, Drizzle, Drivel, Bog.

Some frame the names of runs for frames of mind.
Tremble Copse, Wrath Copse, Anxious Crossroads, Howl,
Doleful and Crazy Trenches, Folly Lane,
Ominous Alley, Worry Trench, Mad Point,
Lunatic Sap, and then Unbearable
Trench, next to Fun Trench, Worry Trench, Hope Trench,
And Happy Alley.

How they swarm, the rats.
Fat beasts and frisking, yellow teeth and tails
Twitching and slippery. Here they are at home
As gaunt and haunted men are not. For rats
Grow plump in ratholes and are not afraid,
Resourceful little beggars, said Tom Thinn,
The day they ate his dinner, as he died.

Their names are legion. Rathole, Rat Farm, Rat Pit,
Rat Post, Fat Rat, Rats' Alley, Dead Rats' Drain,
Rat Heap, Flat Rat, the Better 'Ole, King Rat.
They will outlast us. This is their domain.

And when I die, my spirit will pass by
Through Sulphur Avenue and Devil's Wood
To Jacob's Ladder along Pilgrim's Way
To Eden Trench, through Orchard, through the gate
To Nameless Trench and Nameless Wood, and rest.

—*A. S. Byatt*

(*With thanks to Peter Chasseaud.*)

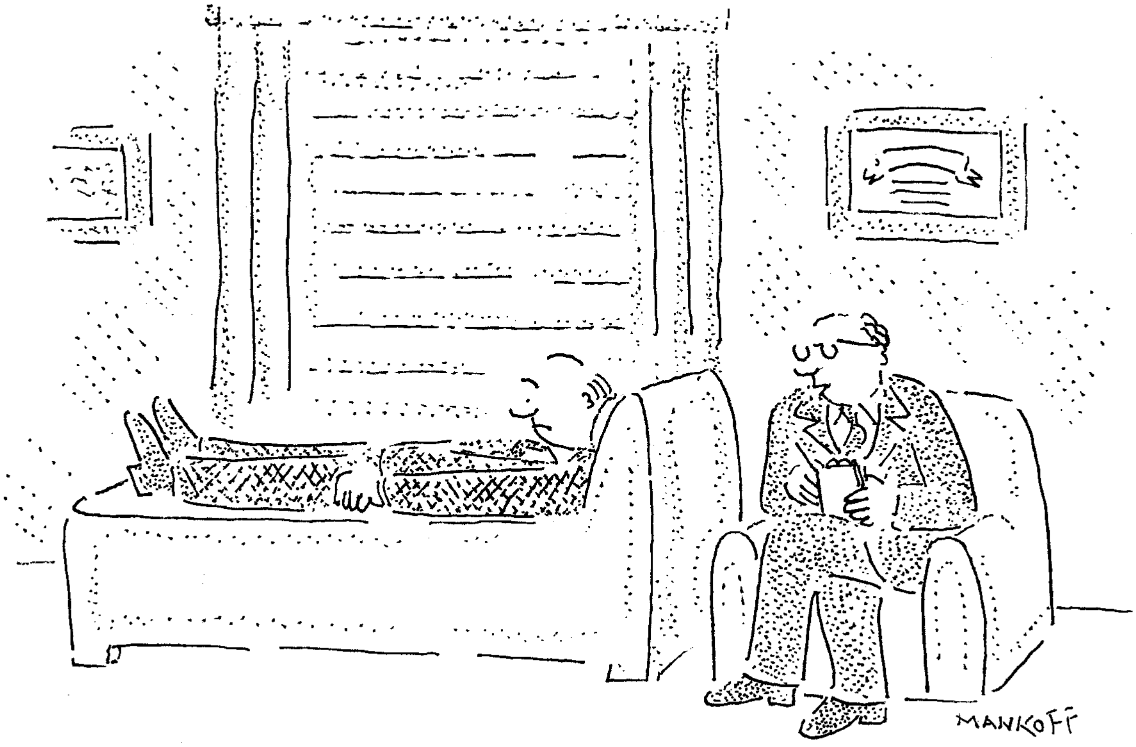
researching the route, an article online caught his attention.

The article, which appeared on the Web site of the magazine *Natural History,* was by Charles Moore, an amateur marine researcher from Long Beach, California. Moore wrote that in 1997 he had placed third in the Transpac, a Los Angeles-to-Hawaii sailing race, using an aluminum-hulled catamaran that he designed. Returning to California on the boat, he decided to take a shortcut, motoring across the doldrums of the North Pacific subtropical gyre—a vast, windless tract of the ocean halfway between Hawaii and the mainland United States, where the currents move in a slow clockwise eddy. As Moore entered the gyre, he saw plastic debris floating in the water, littering the surface like confetti—bottles, bottle caps, wrappers, fragments of plastic. "It seemed unbelievable, but I never found a clear spot," he wrote. "In the week it took to cross the subtropical high, no matter what time of day I looked, plastic debris was floating everywhere."

When Moore got home, he discussed his find with Curtis Ebbesmeyer, an oceanographer in Seattle and an expert on flotsam, who dubbed the area the Eastern Garbage Patch. "But 'patch' doesn't begin to convey the reality," Moore wrote. The area—a kind of plastic soup, in which polymer fragments as small as grains of salt form a broth in which larger chunks of plastic are suspended—has been estimated to be twice the size of Texas. It was being fed with waste plastics from coastal waters off Japan, China, Mexico, and the western United States and from ships at sea. The trash is pulled into the gyre's eddying current, where it rotates indefinitely. In 1999, Moore returned to the area with several other marine researchers and concluded that the percentage of plastic in the water was, by weight, approximately six times that of zooplankton. (Moore published his study in the *Marine Pollution Bulletin* in December, 2001.) Garbage patches have been discovered in other oceans, and researchers estimate the total amount of plastic marine waste to be a hundred million tons.

Plastics pose a significant threat to birds, turtles, and fish, which become entangled in the debris and mistake it for food. Myra Finkelstein, a marine researcher who specializes in environmental toxicology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has examined hundreds of dead albatross chicks on Midway Island, in the Pacific, and has yet to find a carcass free of plastics. "This sharp hazardous material can kill them directly, either by puncturing their digestive tract as it goes down or by creating a blockage so that they can't eat or excrete," Finkelstein told me. "When you open up these dead chicks, which you find all over the island, they're full of toothbrushes and G.I. Joe dolls and plastic syringes."

Most plastics do not biodegrade but, instead, break down into smaller and smaller pieces of polymer; these may not be toxic themselves, but they accumulate poisonous compounds such as DDT and PCBs. The particles are eaten by tiny zooplankton and jellyfish, which are in turn consumed by fish. In this way, the poisons can pass into the food chain and, ultimately, to human beings. "Farmers can grow pesticide-free organic produce," Moore wrote. "But can nature still produce a pollutant-free organic fish? After what I have



*"Just because you work at a bad bank doesn't make you a bad banker."*

• •

seen firsthand in the Pacific, I have my doubts."

"So I read this thing, and I was wondering, Why doesn't anyone know about this?" de Rothschild told me. He decided that his next Adventure Ecology mission would focus on plastic waste in the ocean and include a visit to the Eastern Garbage Patch. As a boy, he had read Thor Heyerdahl's account of his voyage in the Kon-Tiki, and he reread the book while conceiving Plastiki. Heyerdahl was determined to prove that pre-Columbian South Americans had settled Polynesia, more than a thousand years ago, by crossing the Pacific in primitive rafts. Heyerdahl's raft was made of balsa logs lashed together with hemp ropes, and had two masts carved from mangrove wood. He and a crew of five travelled for a hundred and one days, across forty-three hundred miles of ocean, from Peru to the Tuamotu Islands, in the South Pacific.

As de Rothschild's ideas for Plastiki evolved, he realized that he did not want the project to demonize plastic. He was inspired by the work of William McDonough, a leading American environmental architect, and Michael Braungart, a German chemist and former Greenpeace activist. McDonough and Braungart, in their book "Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things" (2002), compared so-called "cradle to grave" products (such as Bic lighters, which are designed to be thrown away after use) with "cradle to cradle" products, which are designed to biodegrade or are used to make new products without any loss in quality. As McDonough and Braungart put it, such products are "upcycled" rather than "downcycled"—their derisive term for conventional recycling, which often means little more than reconstituting a material in a lesser form. (A plastic milk jug becomes a speed bump or a park bench, which ultimately ends up in a landfill.)

De Rothschild decided that Plastiki would feature plastic water bottles, after concluding that they were among the most ubiquitous symbols of unnecessary waste. (Since 1997, sales of bottled water have increased from four billion dollars a year to more than twelve billion dollars.) "The plastic water bottle epitomized everything about this cradle-to-grave mentality," de Rothschild said. "This throwaway, disposable society." McDonough, who met de Rothschild in 2007, at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, told me that he admired de Rothschild's ambitions for Plastiki. "Thor Heyerdahl, with the Kon-Tiki expedition, brought a lot of consciousness to the whole issue of transoceanic migration and people speculating about the history of the world—because it's romantic," McDonough said. "So David is taking a romantic approach to a whole series of very serious issues and will bring them into awareness, through the poetic imagination, with the science behind it. Which is really how cultures can most effectively engage certain kinds of questions—through the delightful prospect of the great adventure."

Among the first people de Rothschild consulted about Plastiki, in May, 2007, was Michael Pawlyn, an environmental architect at a London firm called Exploration, which constructs buildings according to cradle-to-cradle philosophies and "biomimetic" principles, derived from nature. Pawlyn was captivated by the project. "While it's quite an eccentric idea—and I think in some ways David does come out of that English tradition of slightly eccentric explorers—the eccentric idea was really backed up by a clear vision and also a passion to see it through," Pawlyn told me. De Rothschild discussed with Pawlyn his idea for converting the crew's urine and feces into fertilizer, which could eventually be deposited on trees that the crew planted, in a symbolic gesture, on a South Sea island yet to be determined. ("Somehow they'll have to handle the P.R. on that quite carefully," Pawlyn said. "So that it's a very positive story, rather than an unwelcome gift.") Pawlyn suggested that the crew use a dew-condensing technology, based on the water-producing capabilities of the Namibian fog-basking beetle, to collect fresh water at sea. "David was extremely keen on that stuff," Pawlyn said.

In early 2008, de Rothschild hired Andy Dovell, an American-born Australian who has worked on five America's Cup boats. Dovell is known for his willingness to take on unusual projects. In 2002, he developed an award-winning design for a new surfboard fin, the H2, whose aerodynamic shape reduces drag, allowing far greater maneuverability in the water than a traditional fin.

Making Plastiki entirely from recyclable materials proved to be a considerable challenge for Dovell. Modern boats are typically made of fibreglass, a lightweight resin applied to cloth containing fine filaments of glass, which gives the material an ideal strength-to-weight ratio but also makes it impossible to recycle, since its constituent materials cannot be separated. "Boats are absolutely horrible—you cannot recycle them," Dovell says. "The best you can do is pulp them, then bury them." Any fully recyclable material, he believed, would lack the strength of fibreglass, so his design would have to compensate for this weakness.

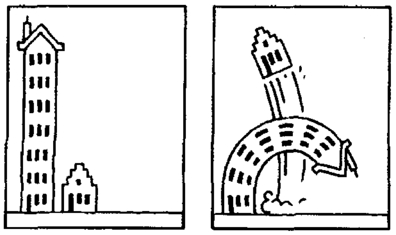
"I thought, Hang on, people travelled the world a long time ago in boats that were B-grade materials," Dovell said. He researched the Polynesian voyaging canoes that had originally inspired Thor Heyerdahl. "I studied their proportions and how they were built," Dovell went on. "During a couple of weeks of mulling it over, I decided on a narrowish catamaran, the proportions of which are determined by the Pacific swell. The Pacific Islanders narrowed in on these proportions by attrition. The voyagers that made it had boats that were of a certain proportion, and the voyagers who didn't had the wrong proportions—either too narrow or too wide."

In February, 2008, Dovell recommended that de Rothschild hire Mike Rose to be his boatbuilder. Like Dovell, Rose was used to tackling difficult construction projects. In 2006, he made a racing yacht, designed by Dovell, called the Radical Forty, which had a swinging keel and folding masts and could be packed into a forty-foot container and shipped around the world. Even so, Rose said, Plastiki was the most challenging boat-building job he had undertaken.

"The biggest difficulty is that there's no established pattern," he told me on Pier 31 in June. "Conventional boat-building was perfected over millennia. This, we just don't know how it's going to work." He pointed at the hulls, with their lumpy rows of bottles packed five deep in places. "From dugout canoes onward, people have struggled to make the hull as regular and smooth as possible. I've spent my life doing that. And now I'm making a boat with hulls like this! How will it affect the boat's performance? Can't say, until we put it in the water." He added, with amused exasperation, "We're deliberately building something that's stupid."

Algalita's bottle boat, the Junk Raft, had sailed on June 1st. De Rothschild had first heard about the project a year earlier, when the National Geographic Society, which was considering shooting a documentary on Plastiki, got in touch with him. "We've learned that there's a man with an expedition called the Plastiki, and he's building a boat made of bottles, and he's going to sail to the Eastern Garbage Patch," an officer at the society told him. "I think you should call him."

De Rothschild did an Internet search and discovered that the leader of the other expedition was Marcus Eriksen, the director of education and research at Charles Moore's Algalita Marine Research Foundation. Convinced that the existence of another Plastiki bottle boat could hardly be a coincidence, he had Kit Hawkins, his production partner, send Eriksen an e-mail asking, "Can you let me know when you started using the word"—Plastiki—"and when you first introduced it to the media?" Eriksen replied that he had started using the name in 2006, and, in a subsequent e-mail, said that he had registered his Web site "some time around March" of 2007. However, when de Rothschild searched Register.com, a company that tracks domain names, he discovered that Algalita's Web site for the project had gone up on June 2, 2007—more than five months after de Rothschild registered his own Plastiki site and made his plans for the expedition public.



Eriksen, a forty-one-year-old former marine, told me that he had been a bottle-boat enthusiast for years. In 2003, he built a raft out of plastic soda bottles and travelled on it from Lake Itasca, Minnesota, to the Gulf of Mexico—a two-thousand-mile, five-month journey that he chronicled in a 2007 book, "My River Home: A Journey from the Gulf War to the Gulf of Mexico." (De Rothschild told me that he had never heard of Eriksen or his book before National Geographic approached him.) Eriksen says that he was aghast at the sight of waste plastics along the route, and after returning home he researched marine debris and learned about Charles Moore's foundation. In May, 2006, Eriksen sailed his next bottle boat, Fluke, made from eight hundred two-litre water bottles, down the Pacific Coast from Santa Barbara to San Diego, a three-hundred-mile journey intended, he says, to call attention to the problem of waste plastics in the ocean. By this time, Eriksen told me, he and Charles Moore were already planning a longer, Kon-Tiki-like Pacific traverse, in a plastic boat that Eriksen wanted to call Plastiki.

"It's sort of like Leibnitz and Newton and the calculus," Moore told me when I called to ask about the two Plastikis. He added that after his organization learned of de Rothschild's expedition "we relinquished the name and went with Junk Raft instead." (In July, 2007, de Rothschild and Eriksen spoke briefly on the phone and, according to both men, Eriksen agreed to abandon the idea of an expedition in the Pacific, saying, "Well, if you're going to do it, there's no point in me doing it.")

De Rothschild heard nothing more about Eriksen until late May, 2008, when he was alerted to the Algalita Foundation's project by a staffer at Adventure Ecology, who had visited Algalita's Web site. De Rothschild sent Eriksen an e-mail wishing him luck.

I asked Eriksen why he had decided to go ahead with the expedition after telling de Rothschild he would not. "I toyed with the idea of saying, 'This guy, if he's so intent on doing it, then he'll get the word out as well,'" Eriksen replied. "But it always was a seed planted in the back of my mind—I want to build this raft." Constructed in just two months, at a cost of forty thousand dollars, the Junk Raft contained fifteen thousand plastic bottles and had a deck made from twenty-four sailboat masts. A week after the Junk Raft's launch, a worker at Pier 31 told de Rothschild that he had been reading Eriksen's blog. Apparently, caps from many of the raft's bottles had been pulled off by the waves. "That's a massive P.R. disaster for a project devoted to drawing attention to waste plastics polluting the seas!" de Rothschild crowed. "They're putting caps into the ocean!" (In fact, Eriksen's blog noted that the caps in question were attached to the bottles' necks with O-rings and did not end up in the ocean.)

Rose finished a small Plastiki prototype in June, having devised an elegant means for holding the bottles steady in the frames. (This involved twenty-foot lengths of narrow plastic tubing strung longitudinally along the hulls.) Later that month, the prototype entered the water for the first time. The good news was that, placed by a crane in the bay, it floated. The bad news was that it could not be steered. Rose diagnosed the problem as resulting from the symmetry of the hulls; in effect, the boat could not distinguish between its front and back ends. Rose attached a rectangle of wood—called a skeg—to the end of each hull, which gave the boat directional control. Over the next three months, he tested the prototype in the bay, adjusting the placement of the sails, three in front, one in back, and experimenting unsuccessfully with using a Polynesian oar as a steering device. "Ridiculously inefficient" was the verdict. Dovell, who visited briefly in late August, decided that he would design some "small steering rudders" and attach them to the rear crossbeam.

The construction of the frame was the team's major concern. In early July, Rose had received a sample of Ecoboard, a material produced in Winchester, Virginia, that is advertised as "a revolutionary wood alternative made from a hundred per cent recycled plastics." Rose had never worked with it before. When the sample, an eight-foot-long panel, arrived at the pier, he tested its strength by placing it between two stacks of boxes a foot or so from the ground. Within minutes, the panel sagged to the floor like a hammock—or, as one Plastiki team member put it, a piece of chewing gum. "When I got the engineering numbers on strength and resilience, I was stunned," Dovell told me. "The material wasn't suitable for a boat." De Rothschild insisted that the team find another, fully recyclable plastic.

The job fell to Matt Grey, Plastiki's project manager. Grey, a thirty-two-year-old Briton, served as a captain in the Corps of Royal Engineers in the British Army from 2001 to 2006. He subsequently spent five months in Iraq, as a minesweeper for frontline U.S. forces, and nearly two years working for Mabey & Johnson, a British company that manufactures and installs modular bridges. He joined the Plastiki team in February, 2008, and moved from London to San Francisco, where he shared a rented house with Rose. Grey had helped solve some of the project's more vexing engineering problems. He came up with the idea of using dry ice to harden the bottles, and when de Rothschild asked him to find an alternative to Ecoboard he read on the Internet about a plastic product called self-reinforced polyethylene terephthalate, or srPET, which was manufactured in Europe. Ordinary PET is the material from which most plastic water bottles are made. The self-reinforced variety is a clothlike substance that derives its strength from long fibres within a matrix; it's like fibreglass but is made entirely of plastic. "There's no cross-contamination of materials," Grey told me. "Which means you have a one-hundred-per-cent-recyclable product."

In early August, Grey and Rose visited an srPET manufacturer in Denmark, where they learned that the matrix material melts at a lower temperature than the fibres. This meant that the team could use vacuum pressure and heat to fuse layers of srPET cloth together for strength and then bond these rigid skins to thicker cores of PET foam to create extremely strong but lightweight panels—all without glue. The vacuum-and-heat process is commonly used to bond composite materials, like fibreglass, to foam or wood cores in boats, cars, and airplane fuselages, but it had not been used on such a scale with srPET. (The product is so new that it has few industrial applications.) One manufacturer offered to test the material for Plastiki at a cost of thirty thousand dollars. "Mike said, 'We can fucking cook it in the oven at home,'" Grey told me. "I was, like, 'O.K., Let's see what happens.'"

Rose and Dovell began cooking skins of srPET in the oven of their rented house and discovered that the matrix melted fully at two hundred degrees Celsius. If the oven was much hotter, the fibres within the matrix began to melt. A representative of Alcan, a composites company with which the team had consulted about the material, called to ask about the men's research. "So there's this multibillion-dollar company peering over our shoulders, looking at what we're doing, and we're doing it all in an oven at home," Grey said.

The Plastiki team decided to turn Pier 31 into an assembly-line factory, where they would vacuum-bag and cook sixty-foot-long panels of srPET and PET cores. Even the walls of the cabin, the furniture and fittings, the shower, and the beds would be made of the material. "The whole thing will be one big piece of PET," Grey told me. "Completely recyclable, and no contaminants in it at all."

De Rothschild was cautiously optimistic. "On one hand, it's a super-exciting material," he told me, referring to srPET. "And not just because it has a huge impact on the Plastiki project itself but also because of the shift that could happen throughout the boating industry if this comes online, as we anticipate it will. There's a capacity now to engineer fully recyclable boats. But we've got a long way to go. No one has ever laid up this material in this way, in sixty-foot-long panels."

Rose had sent some home-cooked samples to an engineering company and to a PET-foam manufacturer, which ran stress tests whose results suggested that large panels could withstand the Pacific waves. But there were unknown factors—such as long immersion in saltwater—that could cause the panels to split or disintegrate during four months at sea. "That means we're the guinea pigs," de Rothschild said.

For most of the summer, the Plastiki team communicated with de Rothschild through e-mails and text messages. Earlier in the year, he had agreed to act as the host and interviewer for "Eco-Trip," a television show about the environment, and he spent July and August filming episodes. Scheduled to begin airing on the Sundance Channel in April, the show traces the life cycles of common consumer items—a cotton T-shirt, a gold ring, a light bulb—from manufacture to disposal, demonstrating their impact on the planet. Colleen Halpin, the show's executive producer, told me that she had approached de Rothschild after speaking to Kevin Wall, a television producer, who, with Al Gore, created the "Live Earth" rock concerts, in 2007. De Rothschild had written a tongue-in-cheek book, "The Live Earth Global Warming Survival Handbook," which was sold at the concerts.

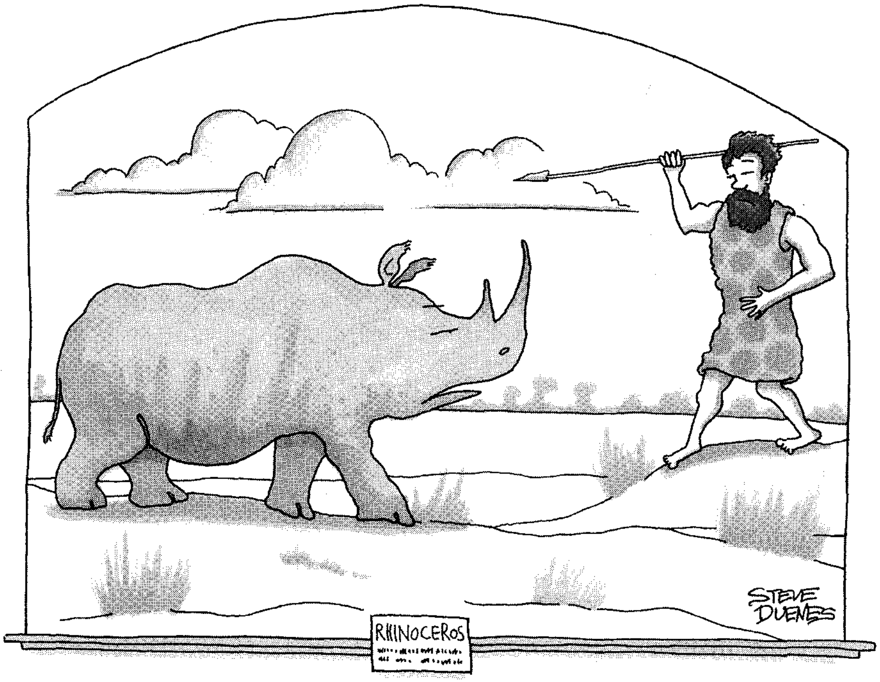
"They were looking at all the usual suspects who were American," Wall says of the search for a host for "Eco-Trip." "TV stars and movie stars. I said to Colleen, 'Look, here's a guy who's six feet four, he's incredibly good-looking, he's single, he's a Rothschild, he's got a mid-Atlantic accent, he's walked across both Poles, and I'm telling you that's where you should place the bet." De Rothschild told me that he took the job because he liked the show's irreverent tone.

The show continued shooting through the end of October, which often meant sixteen-hour days for de Rothschild, who is in every scene of every episode. In four months, he repeatedly crisscrossed North America with the "Eco-Trip" crew, shooting in Nevada, Maine, Vermont, Seattle, British Columbia, Yosemite, West Virginia, Silicon Valley, the Florida Everglades, Chicago, New York, and, in the show's sole foray from the continent, the Dominican Republic. He interviewed scientific experts on global warming, mountaintop removal, salmon farming, and e-waste disposal, and spoke to ordinary people whose lives were being affected by environmental devastation. In that time, he took only four days off, in late August, to visit Burning Man, the annual alternative-culture festival in the mudflats of Nevada, where he celebrated his thirtieth birthday.

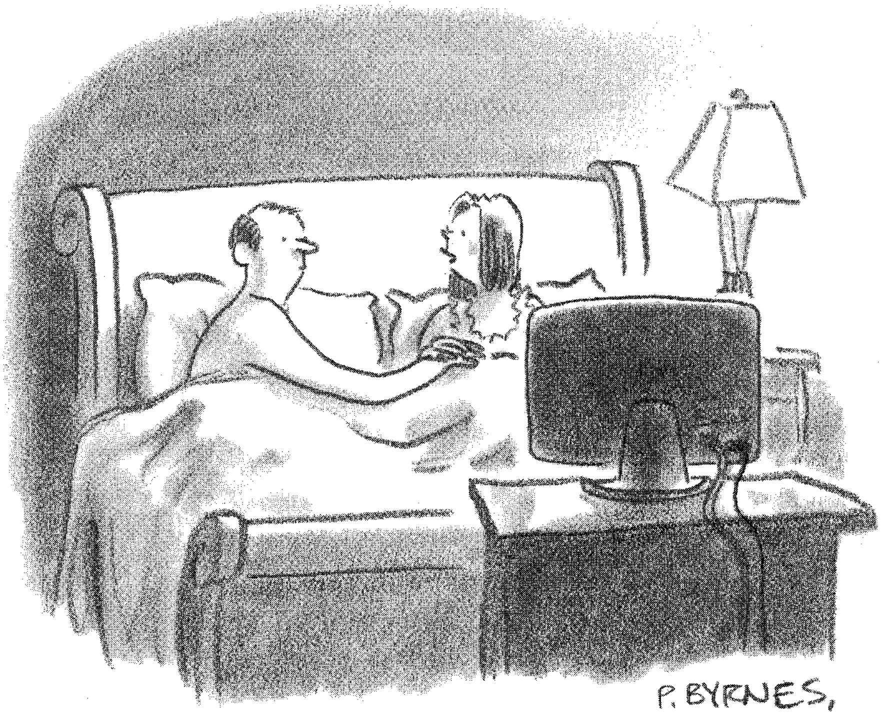
On the last day of October, I joined de Rothschild as he was shooting the final pickup scenes for "Eco-Trip" in locations north of New York City. When he climbed into the back seat of the car that was to take him from the Bowery Hotel, in NoHo, to Mount Vernon, half an hour north of Manhattan, where he was to shoot a segment about e-waste at an electronics-recycling plant, he looked exhausted. He admitted that he had slept only two hours the night before, having got up at 3:30 A.M. to answer text messages.

At the recycling plant, he donned goggles, an apron, and a pair of elbow-length gloves and interviewed the plant's manager as they looked through tall boxes of junked computers, televisions, VCRs, and printers. He watched as a pile of cell phones was funnelled into a twenty-foot-high shredder, which tore them into coin-size pieces. These were then separated, on a slotted table that shook back and forth, into ferrous and nonferrous elements. The manager explained that the factory would sell the material to smelters and manufacturers for reuse, instead of dumping the waste into a landfill, where chemicals and toxins could leach into the water table. At one point, de Rothschild snatched two phones from a conveyor belt and held them to his ears, shouting "Who ordered pizza?" and "Someone's drugs are hidden here!" Halpin laughed. "We let him do a lot of goofy stuff," she said. "Some of it we tone down in the editing room."

Back in the car, on the way to the next location, an organic dairy farm an hour north, de Rothschild talked excitedly on his BlackBerry to Grey in San Francisco about his latest ideas for Plastiki. "We really ought to stop at the Solomon Islands to build a solar project," he said. "And, tomorrow, I've got a meeting with Nike to discuss using the waste plastic from their shoemaking factories to create shoelaces. And I want to make sure that we move ahead on those plans to have students from U.S.C. come to the pier to paint banners and murals and create a kind of drop-in center. And then we've also got to make some decisions about a dry-run Plastiki sail from San Francisco to San Diego." He finished the call by



*"Anytime you want to take this outside the diorama, pal. Anytime."*



*"Or we could turn on the TV and let younger, more beautiful people have sex for us."*

describing a "brain wave" he'd had about outfitting the boat with solar-powered LED lights and contacting NASA to ask whether it might be able to photograph the lit-up vessel from outer space.

De Rothschild was determined to create a "lasting legacy" for Plastiki. As a cautionary tale, he cited the Junk Raft, which had arrived safely in Honolulu at the end of August—after eighty-seven days at sea, during which Eriksen and a crew member had dodged four hurricanes and subsisted largely on canned beans. The Junk Raft skirted the edge of the Eastern Garbage Patch, posted videos to YouTube, and collected plastic and plankton samples from the gyre, which Eriksen plans to distribute to legislators and educators, during a fifteen-city bicycle tour in April. "As an out-and-out adventure, I take my hat off to them," de Rothschild told me. "I think it's fantastic, but—and I mean this in the nicest possible way—if the Plastiki was just an adventure, I would consider our expedition a failure. Because I think the Junk Raft created some awareness and got some media stories, but I really wonder what the impact truly is." He noted that Eriksen had not updated the Junk Raft blog since arriving in Hawaii. He maintained that Plastiki's influence would be greater.

In November, de Rothschild moved to San Francisco to devote himself to Plastiki full time. After pushing back the date of the launch, because of production delays, he had settled on April 28, 2009—sixty-two years to the day since Thor Heyerdahl set out from Peru on the Kon-Tiki.

By late January, Pier 31 was bustling with activity as workers, rushing to meet the launch deadline, began assembling the actual boat. In the center of the build site sat two large, curved wooden platforms—halves of the mold that was to be used to make the boat's deck. On top of one platform, four carpenters were constructing a plywood mold for the crew cabin: a geodesic pod twenty feet long and six feet high, made of interlocking triangles and designed by volunteers from Architecture for Humanity. A few feet away, two young women, using sixteen-ounce measuring spoons, were putting dry-ice powder into two-litre soda bottles, then screwing on the caps. In two weeks, they had prepared forty-two hundred bottles, but they still had eight thousand to go. More bottles arrived daily from a waste-management company, which hauled them to the pier in dumpsters.

On the opposite side of the space was a conference table holding laptops and a large printer, where de Rothschild, dressed against the pier's pervasive chill in a flannel shirt and a wool ski cap, sat with Matt Grey and the most recent addition to the Plastiki team, Josian Heyerdahl—Thor's twenty-five-year-old granddaughter. A small brown-haired woman in a parka, Josian was born in Italy and reared in South Africa. As a child, she was fascinated by environmentalism, in part because of her famous grandfather. "My grandfather was an advocate for sustainability before it became a buzzword," Josian told me. "He lived a very organic life style." An environmental scientist, she had recently moved from Sydney to Palo Alto—drawn, she said, "by California's progressive environmental policies"—and had read a magazine story about de Rothschild and Plastiki. "I saw the reference to the Kon-Tiki, so I wrote and asked if I could meet him when he was next in San Francisco," she said.

After several visits to Pier 31, Josian accepted an invitation from de Rothschild to join the expedition on the final leg of its journey. In the meantime, he had secured a similar commitment from Josian's cousin Olav Heyerdahl, who in 2006 retraced his grandfather's Pacific crossing in a balsa-wood raft. Olav was to join Plastiki on the first leg of the trip, from San Francisco to San Diego.

Josian also signed on to work three days a week at the pier, where de Rothschild put her in charge of a project he had concocted to insure Plastiki's legacy: the "SMART competition," whose purpose was to find novel ways to turn waste into a resource. The name of the competition stood for the five fields in which de Rothschild hoped to solicit entries: science, marketing, art and industrial design, research, and technology. (The people with the best ideas in each of these fields, as determined by a jury of experts, will be awarded a cash prize of an amount "yet to be determined," de Rothschild says.) "To me, that's the most exciting bit," he told me at the pier in late January. "To be able to sit down, post-Plastiki, with a list of solutions and activities that have been inspired by the expedition—these five or ten projects are going to become a reality for beating waste. They give us a quantifiable measure of the project's success."

By this time, Matt Grey and Mike Rose had spent weeks preparing the assembly line for making the srPET panels. Running the length of the pier were two huge tables with heat-resistant tops. At the end of one of the tables stood a five-foot-high aluminum frame on casters and, on top of the frame, two gas-fed catalytic heating elements that looked a little like waffle irons. Finally, there was a roll of high-temperature, clear-plastic vacuum-bagging material—ten thousand dollars for three rolls—mounted on a spool. The plan was to stack the srPET-cloth layers and PET-foam cores on the tables, vacuum-bag them, then roll the heating apparatus down their lengths, melting the materials together. Rose's first attempt was not perfect, however. The srPET failed to bond sufficiently to the foam, and the panels had warped.

"I'm pretty sure it's because we heated the panels too quickly, and too hot," Rose told de Rothschild. He said that he was going to try again, using less heat and cooking the panels longer.

"O.K.," de Rothschild said uncertainly. "I'll check in later." He returned to the conference table, where he was scheduled to meet with a team from Hewlett-Packard to discuss ways to store digital data collected during the trip.

Rose's helpers placed two pieces of foam core on one of the tables, then arranged three layers of srPET cloth on the foam, carefully lining up the edges and trimming away the excess with a heating element. They wrapped the cloth and foam in a sheet of vacuum-bagging plastic, which they sealed tight. Rose poked a plastic tube through one end of the bag. The other end was attached to a small vacuum pump, which he turned on. The vacuum sucked air out from under the plastic sheet. Within five minutes, the bag had formed a skin over the panel, exerting a pressure of one ton per square foot.

Rose ignited the catalytic heating elements, and after an hour the team had heated one side of one panel. At a certain point, Rose realized that his helpers had moved the heater along too quickly, slightly undercooking a two-inch strip of panel. "You've got to cook every inch!" he said urgently. "Otherwise, the skin will separate from the foam. Then the whole panel will come apart. The boat will break up, and lives will be in danger!"

Toward the end of the day, Grey and de Rothschild came over. Grim-faced, they studied a few of Rose's panels. It appeared that it would take three to four months simply to cook all the panels for the frame.

"I've told our sponsors and partners and the media and the team that we're leaving in three months," de Rothschild said, after Rose's workers had left for the day. "But we won't have a boat!"

Early the next morning, Greg Pronko and Mike O'Reilly, the owners of a local company that uses sophisticated plastics to make laminated snowboards, pulled into the pier in a biodiesel van. Rose hoped to hire the men, whose company owned a robotic-controlled router, to cut the panels for the boat's bulkheads. Pronko and O'Reilly examined the panel-making operation and advised de Rothschild to replace Rose's system with a mechanized process. Pronko and O'Reilly—eco-minded San Franciscans in their mid-thirties, who, in 2006, converted their factory to solar power and had lately been trying to develop a biodegradable plastic for packaging—also suggested using a PET adhesive film to bind the boat's beams, bulkheads, and hulls.

Pronko and O'Reilly joined the Plastiki team that day. From their snowboard factory, they shipped to the pier a massive thermoplastics-bonding machine, which compressed the vacuum-bagged layers of srPET and PET-foam core on both sides simultaneously, at a temperature of two hundred degrees Celsius—a process that enabled three people to produce bulkheads and small panels at a rate of about two inches per minute. Rose says that within a few days of his initial attempts he had improved his process for making panels, and that his rate of production was faster than the machine's. Nevertheless, in March de Rothschild dismissed Rose. "It just felt that the project got to the point where it needed a good injection of energy from some new people," de Rothschild wrote in an e-mail. Rose also wrote to me, saying, "Being the only professional of any sort (builder, skipper, etc.) on the project, I was the odd one out."

When I spoke to de Rothschild in mid-March, he sounded upbeat. "We're turning out some beautiful panels for the bulkheads," he said, "and I've finally started sailing lessons in the bay!" But that same week Adventure Ecology announced that Plastiki's launch was being pushed back from April 28th to an unspecified date, "most probably in the summer."

More bad news followed. An official from the San Francisco Port Authority inspected the pier and, concluding that the building was unsafe, told the Plastiki team that it would have to move out. The same day, the team discovered that many of the bottles that had been hardened with dry ice had started to leak. "It's, like, why would thirty per cent of the bottles that we've done now start leaking?" de Rothschild wondered. He subsequently learned that the leaks were due to slightly defective threads on certain caps—an easy enough problem to fix—and, ultimately, the team didn't have to move far: just to the opposite end of the pier, near the large doors that opened onto the Embarcadero. De Rothschild seemed almost to relish the obstacles. "I don't want people to think that this is easy," he told me.

In his view, the problems only underscored the differences between the Junk Raft—a crudely assembled boat that simply floated on the Pacific currents—and Plastiki. His would be a full-scale catamaran of purely experimental design, construction, and materials—a boat that, he hoped, would revolutionize shipbuilding. If the price of such ambition was repeated setbacks, de Rothschild was more than willing to accept that.

"We could get out past the Golden Gate Bridge, sail up the coast for three days, and everything's fine," he said. "Or we could get up there, and it's 'All right, this is really not performing how we thought it would'—stuff is breaking all over the place or materials start to delaminate. Know what I mean? These are just unknowns. That's an adventure! If it was planned and everyone knew, no one would be interested." ♦

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**NEWYORKER.COM**

Video: The making of Plastiki.

FICTION

# VISITATION

BY BRAD WATSON

Loomis had never believed that line about the quality of despair being that it was unaware of being despair. He'd been painfully aware of his own despair for most of his life. Most of his troubles had come from attempts to deny the essential hopelessness in his nature. To believe in the viability of nothing, finally, was socially unacceptable, and he had tried to adapt, to pass as a believer, a hoper. He had taken prescription medicine, engaged in periods of vigorous, cleansing exercise, declared his satisfaction with any number of fatuous jobs and foolish relationships. Then one day he'd decided that he should marry, have a child, and he told himself that if one was open-minded these things could lead to a kind of contentment, if not to exuberant happiness. That's why Loomis was in the fix he was in now.

Ever since he and his wife had separated and she had moved with their son to Southern California, he'd flown out every three weeks to visit the boy. He was living the very nightmare he'd tried not to imagine when deciding to marry and have a child: that it wouldn't work out, they would split up, and he would be forced to spend long weekends in a motel, taking his son to faux-upscale chain restaurants, cineplexes, and amusement parks.

He usually visited for three to five days and stayed at the same motel, an old motor court that had been bought and remodelled by one of the big franchises. At first the place wasn't so bad. The Continental breakfast included fresh fruit and little boxes of name-brand cereals and batter with which you could make your own waffles on a double waffle iron right there in the lobby. The syrup came in small plastic containers from which you pulled back a foil lid and voilà, it was a pretty good waffle. There was juice and decent coffee. Still, of course, it was depressing, a bleak place in which to do one's part in raising a child. With its courtyard surrounded by two stories of identical rooms, and excepting the lack of guard towers and the presence of a swimming pool, it followed the same architectural model as a prison.

But Loomis's son liked it, so they continued to stay there, even though Loomis would rather have moved on to a better place.

He arrived in San Diego for his April visit, picked up the rental car, and drove north on I-5. Traffic wasn't bad except

STEPHEN SHORE, "PERRINE, FLORIDA, NOVEMBER 11, 1977"/303 GALLERY

BALDOMERO FERNANDEZ, "BEACH BALL, PIGEON FORGE" (2001)

where it always was, between Del Mar and Carlsbad. Of course, it was never "good." Their motel sat right next to the 5, and the roar and rush of it never stopped. You could step out onto the balcony at three in the morning and it'd be just as roaring and rushing with traffic as it had been six hours before.

This was to be one of his briefer visits. He'd been to a job interview the day before, Thursday, and had another one on Tuesday. He wanted to make the most of the weekend, which meant doing very little besides just being with his son. Although he wasn't very good at doing that. Generally, he sought distractions from his ineptitude as a father. He stopped at a liquor store and bought a bottle of bourbon, and tucked it into his travel bag before driving up the hill to the house where his wife and son lived. The house was owned by a retired marine friend of his wife's family. His wife and son lived rent-free in the basement apartment.

When Loomis arrived, the ex-marine was on his hands and knees in the flower bed, pulling weeds. He glared sideways at Loomis for a moment and muttered something, his face a mask of disgust. He was a widower who clearly hated Loomis and refused to speak to him. Loomis was unsettled that someone he'd never even been introduced to could hate him so much.

His son came to the door of the apartment by himself, as usual. Loomis peered past the boy into the little apartment, which was bright and sunny for a basement (only in California, he thought). But there was no sign of his estranged wife. She had conspired with some part of her nature to become invisible. Loomis hadn't laid eyes on her in nearly a year. She called out from somewhere in another room, "Bye! I love you! See you on Monday!"

"O.K., love you, too," the boy said and trudged after Loomis, dragging his backpack of homework and a change of clothes. "Bye, Uncle Bob," the boy said to the ex-marine. Uncle Bob! The ex-marine stood up, gave the boy a small salute, then he and the boy exchanged high fives.

After Loomis checked in at the motel, they went straight to their room and watched television for a while. Lately, his son had been watching cartoons made in the Japanese anime style. Loomis thought the animation was wooden and amateurish. He didn't get it at all. The characters were drawn as angularly as origami, which he supposed was appropriate and maybe even intentional, if the influence was Japanese. But it seemed irredeemably foreign. His son sat propped against several pillows, harboring such a shy but mischievous grin that Loomis had to indulge him.

He made a drink and stepped out onto the balcony to smoke a cigarette. Down by the pool, a woman with long, thick black hair—it was stiffly unkempt, like a madwoman's in a movie—sat in a deck chair with her back to Loomis, watching two children play in the water. The little girl was nine or ten, and the boy was older, maybe fourteen. The boy teased the girl by splashing her face with water, and when she protested in a shrill voice he leapt over and dunked her head. She came up gasping and began to cry. Loomis was astonished that the woman, who he assumed was the children's mother, displayed no reaction. Was she asleep?

The motel had declined steadily in the few months that Loomis had been staying there, like a moderately stable person drifting and sinking into the lassitude of depression. Loomis wanted to help, find some way to speak to the managers and the other employees, to say, "Buck up, don't just let things go all to hell," but he felt powerless against his own inclinations.

He lit a second cigarette to go with the rest of his drink. A few other people walked up and positioned themselves around the pool's apron, but none got into the water with the two quarrelling children. There was something feral about them, anyone could see. The woman with the wild black hair continued to sit in her pool chair as if asleep or drugged. The boy's teasing of the girl had become steadily rougher, and the girl was sobbing now. Still, the presumptive mother did nothing. Someone went in to complain. One of the managers came out and spoke to the woman, who immediately, but without getting up from her deck chair, shouted to the boy, "All right, God damn it!" The boy, smirking, climbed from the pool, leaving the girl standing in waist-deep water, sobbing and rubbing her eyes with her fists. The woman stood up then and walked toward the boy. There was something off about her clothes, burnt-orange Bermuda shorts and a men's lavender oxford shirt. And they didn't seem to fit right. The boy, like a wary stray dog, watched her approach. She snatched a lock of his wet black hair, pulled his face to hers, and said something, gave his head a shake and let him go. The boy went over to the pool and spoke to the girl. "Come on," he said. "No," the girl said, still crying. "You let him help you!" the woman shouted, startling the girl into letting the boy take her hand. Loomis was fascinated, a little bit horrified.

Turning back toward her chair, the woman looked up to where he stood on the balcony. She had an astonishing face, broad and long, divided by a great, curved nose, dominated by a pair of large, dark, sunken eyes that seemed blackened by blows or some terrible history. Such a face, along with her immense, thick mane of black hair, made her look like a troll. Except that she was not ugly. She looked more like a witch, the cruel mockery of beauty and seduction. The oxford shirt was mostly unbuttoned, nearly spilling out a pair of full, loose, mottled-brown breasts.

## THE POEM THAT CAN'T BE WRITTEN

is different from the poem
that is not written, or the many

that are never finished—those boats
lost in the fog, adrift

in the windless latitudes,
the charts useless, the water gone.

In the poem that cannot
be written there is no danger,

no ponderous cargo of meaning,
no meaning at all. And this

is its splendor, this is how
it becomes an emblem,

not of failure or loss,
but of the impossible.

So the wind rises. The tattered sails
billow, and the air grows sweeter.

A green island appears.
Everyone is saved.

—*Lawrence Raab*

"What are you looking at!" she shouted, very loudly from deep in her chest. Loomis stepped back from the balcony railing. The woman's angry glare changed to something like shrewd assessment, and then dismissal. She shooed her two children into one of the downstairs rooms.

After taking another minute to finish his drink and smoke a third cigarette, to calm down, Loomis went back inside and closed the sliding glass door behind him.

His son was on the bed, grinning, watching something on television called "Code Lyoko." Loomis tried to watch it with him for a while, but got restless. He wanted a second, and maybe stronger, drink.

"Hey," he said. "How about I just get some burgers and bring them back to the room?"

The boy glanced at him and said, "That'd be O.K."

Loomis got a sack of hamburgers from McDonald's, some fries, a Coke. He made a second drink, then a third, while his son ate and watched television. They went to bed early.

The next afternoon, Saturday, they drove to the long, wide beach at Carlsbad. Carlsbad was far too cool, but what could you do? Also, the hip little surf shop where the boy's mother worked during the week was in Carlsbad. He'd forgotten that for a moment. He was having a hard time keeping her in his mind. Her invisibility strategy was beginning to work on him. He wasn't sure at all anymore just who she was or ever had been. When they'd met, she wore business attire, like everyone else he knew. What did she wear now? Did she get up and go around in a bikini all day? She didn't really have the body for that at age thirty-nine, did she?

"What does your mom wear to work?" he asked.

The boy gave him a look that would

have been ironic if he'd been a less compassionate child.

"Clothes?" the boy said.

"O.K.," Loomis said. "Like a swimsuit? Does she go to work in a swimsuit?"

"Are you O.K.?" the boy said.

Loomis was taken aback by the question.

"Me?" he said.

They walked along the beach, neither going into the water. Loomis enjoyed collecting rocks. The stones on the beach here were astounding. He marvelled at one that resembled an ancient war club. The handle fit perfectly into his palm. From somewhere over the water, a few miles south, they could hear the stuttering thud of a large helicopter's blades. Most likely a military craft from the Marine base farther north.

Maybe he wasn't O.K. Loomis had been to five therapists since separating from his wife: one psychiatrist, one psychologist, three counsellors. The psychiatrist had tried him on Paxil, Zoloft, and Wellbutrin for depression, and lorazepam for anxiety. Only the lorazepam had helped, but with that he'd overslept too often and lost his job. The psychologist, once she learned that Loomis was drinking almost half a bottle of booze every night, became fixated on getting him to join A.A. and seemed to forget altogether that he was there to figure out whether he indeed no longer loved his wife. And why he had cheated on her. Why he had left her for another woman when the truth was that he had no faith that the new relationship would work out any better than the old one. The first counsellor seemed sensible, but Loomis made the mistake of visiting her together with his wife, and when she suggested that maybe their marriage was kaput his wife had walked out. The second counsellor was actually his wife's counsellor, and Loomis thought she was an idiot. Loomis suspected that his wife liked the second counsellor because she did nothing but nod and sympathize and give them brochures. He suspected that his wife simply didn't want to move out of their house, which she liked far more than Loomis did, and which possibly she *liked more than she liked Loomis.* When she realized that divorce was inevitable, she shifted gears, remembered that she wanted to surf, and sold the house before Loomis was even aware it was on the market, so he had to sign. Then it was Loomis who mourned the loss of the house. He visited the third counsellor with his girlfriend, who seemed constantly angry that his divorce hadn't yet come through. He and the girlfriend both gave up on that counsellor because he seemed terrified of them for some reason they couldn't fathom. Loomis was coming to the conclusion that he couldn't fathom anything; the word seemed appropriate to him, because most of the time he felt as if he were drowning and couldn't find the bottom or the surface of this murky body of water he had fallen, or dived, into.

He wondered if this was why he didn't want to dive into the crashing waves of the Pacific, as he certainly would have when he was younger. His son didn't want to because, he said, he'd rather surf.

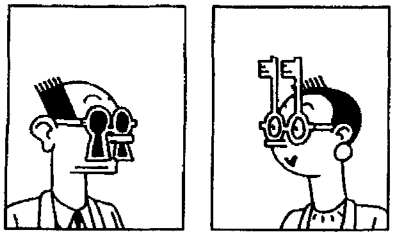
"But you don't know how to surf," Loomis said.

"Mom's going to teach me as soon as she's good enough at it," the boy said.

"But don't you need to be a better swimmer before you try to surf?" Loomis had a vague memory of the boy's swimming lessons, which maybe hadn't gone so well.

"No," the boy said.

"I really think," Loomis said, and then he stopped speaking, because the helicopter he'd been hearing, one of those large twin-engine birds that carry troops in and out of combat—a Chinook—had come abreast of them, a quarter mile or so off the beach. Just as Loomis looked up to see it, something coughed or exploded in one of its engines. The helicopter slowed, then swerved, with the slow grace of an airborne leviathan, toward the beach where they stood. In a moment it was directly over them. One of the men in it leaned out of a small opening on its side, frantically waving, but the people on the beach, including Loomis and his son, beaten by the blast from the blades and stung by sand driven up by it, were too shocked and confused to run. The helicopter lurched back out over the water with a tremendous roar and a deafening, rattling whine from the engines. There was another loud pop, and black smoke streamed from the forward engine as the Chinook made its way north again, seeming hobbled. Then it was gone, lost in the glare over the water. A bittersweet burnt-fuel smell hung in the air. Loomis and his son stood there among the others on the beach, speechless. One of two very brown young surfers in board shorts and crewcuts grinned and nodded at the clublike rock in Loomis's hand.



"Dude, we're safe," he said. "You can put down the weapon." He and the other surfer laughed.

Loomis's son, looking embarrassed, moved off as if he were with someone else in the crowd, not Loomis.

They stayed in Carlsbad for an early dinner at Pizza Port. The place was crowded with people who'd been at the beach all day, although Loomis recognized no one they'd seen when the helicopter had nearly crashed and killed them all. He'd expected everyone in there to know about it, to be buzzing about it over beer and pizza, amazed, exhilarated. But it was as if it hadn't happened.

The long rows of picnic tables and booths were filled with young parents and their hyperkinetic children, who kept jumping up to get extra napkins or forks or to climb into the seats of the motorcycle video games. Their parents flung arms after them like inadequate lassos or pursued them and herded them back. The stools along the bar were occupied by young men and women who apparently had no children and who were attentive only to one another and to choosing which of the restaurant's many microbrews to order. In the corner by the rest rooms, the old surfers, regulars here, gathered to talk shop and knock back the stronger beers, the double-hopped and the barley wines. Their graying hair frizzled and tied in ponytails or dreads or chopped in stiff clumps dried by salt and sun. Their faces leather brown. Gnarled toes jutting from their flip-flops and worn sandals like assortments of dry-roasted cashews, Brazil nuts, ginger root.

Loomis felt no affinity for any of them. There wasn't a single person in the entire place with whom he felt a thing in common—other than being, somehow, human. Toward the parents he felt a bitter disdain. On the large TV screens fastened to the restaurant's brick walls surfers skimmed down giant waves off Hawaii, Tahiti, Australia.

He gazed at the boy, his son. The boy looked just like his mother. Thick bright-orange hair, untamable. They were tall, stemlike people with long limbs and that thick hair blossom on top. Loomis had called them his rosebuds. "Roses are red," his son would respond, delightedly indignant, when he was smaller. "There are orange roses," Loomis would reply. "Where?" "Well, in Indonesia, I think. Or possibly Brazil." "No!" his son would shout, breaking down into giggles on the floor. He bought them orange roses on the boy's birthday that year.

The boy wasn't so easily amused anymore. He waited glumly for their pizza order to be called out. They'd secured a booth vacated by a smallish family.

"You want a Coke?" Loomis said. The boy nodded absently. "I'll get you a Coke," Loomis said.

He got the boy a Coke from the fountain, and ordered a pint of strong pale ale from the bar for himself.

By the time their pizza came, Loomis was on his second ale. He felt much better about all the domestic chaos around them in the restaurant. It was getting on the boy's nerves, though. As soon as they finished their pizza, he asked Loomis if he could go stand outside and wait for him there.

"I'm almost done," Loomis said.

"I'd really rather wait outside," the boy said. He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away.

"O.K.," Loomis said. "Don't wander off. Stay where I can see you."

"I will."

Loomis sipped his beer and watched as the boy weaved his way through the crowd and out of the restaurant, then began to pace back and forth on the sidewalk. Having to be a parent in this fashion was awful. He felt indicted by all the other people in this teeming place: by the parents and their smug happiness, by the old surfer dudes, who had the courage of their lack of conviction, and by the young lovers, who were convinced that they would never be part of either of these groups, not the obnoxious parents, not the grizzled losers clinging to youth like tough, crusty barnacles. Certainly they would not be Loomis.

And what did it mean, in any case, that he couldn't even carry on a conversation with his son? How hard could that be? To hear him try, you'd think they didn't know each other at all, that he was a friend of the boy's father, watching him for the afternoon or something. He got up to leave, but hesitated, then gulped down the rest of his second beer.

His son stood with hunched shoulders, waiting.

"Ready to go back to the motel?" Loomis said. There was plenty of light left in the day for another walk on the beach, but he wasn't up to it.

The boy nodded. They walked back to the car in silence.

"Did you like your pizza?" Loomis said when they were in the car.

"Sure. It was O.K."

Loomis looked at him for a moment. The boy glanced back with the facial equivalent of a shrug, an impressively diplomatic expression that managed to say both "I'm sorry" and "What do you want?" Loomis sighed. He could think of nothing else to say that wasn't even more inane.

"All right," he finally said, and drove them back to the motel.

When they arrived, Loomis heard a commotion in the courtyard, and they paused near the gate.

The woman who'd been watching the two awful children was there at the pool again, and the two children themselves had returned to the water. But now the group seemed to be accompanied by an older heavyset man, bald on top, graying hair slicked against the sides of his head. He was arguing with a manager while the other guests around the pool pretended to ignore the altercation. The boy and girl paddled about in the water until the man threw up his hands and told them to get out and go to their room. The girl glanced at the boy, but the boy continued to ignore the man until he strode to the edge of the pool and shouted, "Get out! Let them have their filthy pool. Did you piss in it? I hope you pissed in it. Now get out! Go to the room!" The boy removed himself from the pool with a kind of languorous choreography, and walked toward the sliding glass door of one of the downstairs rooms, the little girl following. Just before reaching the door the boy paused, turned his head in the direction of the pool and the other guests there, and hawked and spat onto the concrete pool apron. Loomis said to his son, "Let's get on up to the room."

Another guest, a lanky young woman whom Loomis had seen beside the pool earlier, walked past them on her way to the parking lot. "Watch out for them Gypsies," she muttered.

"Gypsies?" the boy said.

The woman laughed as she rounded the corner. "Don't let 'em get you," she said.

"I don't know," Loomis said when she'd gone. "I guess they do seem a little like Gypsies."

"What the hell is a Gypsy, anyway?"

Loomis stopped and stared at his son. "Does 'Uncle Bob' teach you to talk that way?"

The boy shrugged and looked away, annoyed.

In the room, his son pressed him about the Gypsies, and he told him that they were originally from some part of India, he wasn't sure which, and that they were ostracized, nobody wanted them. They became nomads, wandering around Europe. They were poor. People accused them of stealing. "They had a reputation for stealing people's children, I think."

He'd meant this to be a kind of joke, or at least lighthearted, but when he saw the expression on the boy's face he regretted it and quickly added, "They didn't, really."

It didn't work. For the next hour, the boy asked him questions about Gypsies and kidnapping. Every few minutes or so, he hopped from the bed to the sliding glass door and pulled the curtain aside to peek down across the courtyard at the Gypsies' room. Loomis had decided to concede that they were Gypsies, whether they really were or not. He made himself a stiff nightcap and stepped out onto the balcony to smoke, although he also peeked through the curtains before going out, to make sure the coast was clear.

The next morning, Sunday, Loomis rose before his son and went down to the lobby for coffee. He stepped out into the empty courtyard to drink it in the morning air, and when he looked into the pool he saw a large dead rat on its side at the bottom. The rat looked peacefully dead, with its eyes closed and its front paws curled at its chest as if it were begging. Loomis took another sip of his coffee and went back into the lobby. The night clerk was still on duty, studying something on the computer monitor behind the desk. She only cut her eyes at Loomis, and when she saw he was going to approach her she met his gaze steadily in that same way, without turning her head.

"I believe you have an unregistered guest at the bottom of your pool," Loomis said.

He got a second cup of coffee, a plastic cup of juice, and a couple of refrigerator-cold bagels (the waffle iron and fresh fruit had disappeared a couple of visits earlier) and took them back to the room. He and his son ate there, then Loomis decided that they should get away from the motel for the day. The boy could always be counted on to want a day trip to San Diego. He loved to ride the red trolleys there, and tolerated Loomis's interest in the museums, sometimes.

They took the commuter train down, rode the trolley to the Mexican border, turned around, and came back. They ate lunch in a famous old diner near downtown, then took a bus to Balboa Park and spent the afternoon in the air-and-space museum and the natural-history museum, and at a small, disappointing model-railroad exhibit. Then they took the train back up the coast.

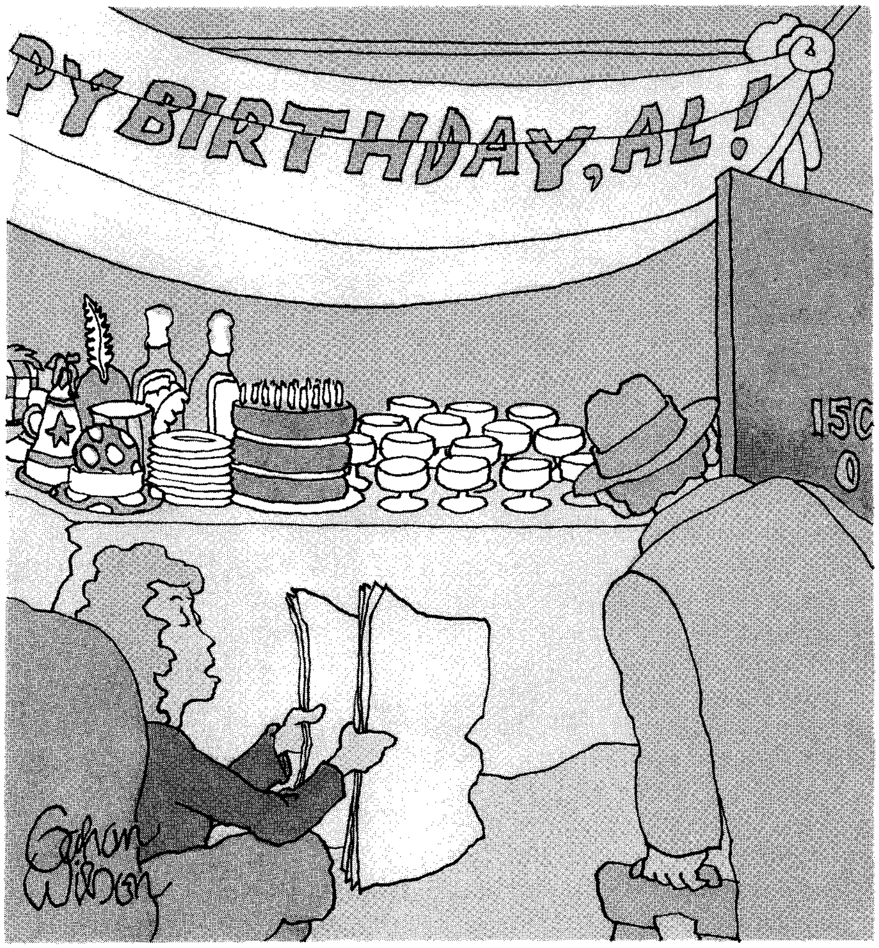
As they got out of the car at the motel, an old brown van, plain and blocky as a loaf of bread, careened around the far corner of the lot, pulled up next to Loomis, and stopped. The driver was the older man who'd been at the pool. He leaned toward Loomis and said through the open passenger window, "Can you give me twenty dollars? They're going to kick us out of this stinking motel."

Loomis felt a surge of hostile indignation. What, did he have a big sign on his chest telling everyone what a loser he was?

"I don't have it," he said.

"Come on!" the man shouted. "Just twenty bucks!"

Loomis saw his son standing beside the passenger door of the car, frightened.



*"This was supposed to be a surprise party for you, but nobody showed up."*

"No," he said. He was ready to punch the old man now.

"Son of a bitch!" the man shouted, and gunned the van away, swerving onto the street toward downtown and the beach.

The boy gestured for Loomis to hurry over and unlock the car door, and as soon as he did the boy got back into the passenger seat. When Loomis sat down behind the wheel, the boy hit the lock button.

"Was he trying to rob us?" he said.

"No. He wanted me to give him twenty dollars."

The boy was breathing hard and looking straight out the windshield, close to tears.

"It's O.K.," Loomis said. "He's gone."

"Pop, no offense"—and the boy actually reached over and patted Loomis on the forearm, as if to comfort him—"but I think I want to sleep at home tonight."

Loomis was so astonished by the way his son had touched him on the arm that he was close to tears himself.

"It'll be O.K.," he said. "Really. We're safe here, and I'll protect you."

"I know, Pop, but I really think I want to go home."

Loomis tried to keep the obvious pleading note from his voice. If this happened, if he couldn't even keep his son around and reasonably satisfied to be with him for a weekend, what was he at all anymore? And (he couldn't help but think) what would the boy's mother make of it, how much worse would he look in her eyes?

"Please," he said to the boy. "Just come on up to the room for a while, and we'll talk about it again, and if you still want to go home later on I'll take you, I promise."

The boy thought about it and agreed, and began to calm down a little. They went up to the room, past the courtyard, which was blessedly clear of ridiculous Gypsies and other guests. Loomis got a bucket of ice for his bourbon, ordered Chinese, and they lay together on Loomis's bed, eating and watching television, and didn't talk about the Gypsies, and after a while, exhausted, they both fell asleep.

When the alcohol woke him at 3 A.M., he was awash in a sense of gloom and dread. He found the remote, turned down the sound on the TV. His son was sleeping, mouth open, a lock of his bright-orange hair across his face.

Loomis eased himself off the bed, sat on the other one, and watched him breathe. He recalled the days when his life with the boy's mother had seemed happy, and the boy had been small, and they would put him to bed in his room, where they had built shelves for his toy trains and stuffed animals and the books from which Loomis would read to him at bedtime. He remembered the constant battle in his heart those days. How he was drawn into this construction of conventional happiness, how he felt that he loved this child more than he had ever loved anyone in his entire life, how all of this was possible, this life, how he might actually be able to do it. And yet whenever he had felt this he was also aware of the other, more deeply seated part of his nature that wanted to run away in fear. That believed it was not possible after all, that it could only end in catastrophe, that anything this sweet and heartbreaking must indeed one day collapse into shattered pieces. How he had struggled to free himself, one way or another, from what seemed a horrible limbo of anticipation. He had run away, in his fashion. And yet nothing had ever caused him to feel anything more like despair than what he felt just now, in this moment, looking at his beautiful child asleep on the motel bed in the light of the cheap lamp, with the incessant dull roar of cars on I-5 just the other side of the hedge, a slashing river of what seemed nothing but desperate travel from point A to point B, from which one mad dasher or another would simply disappear, blink out in a flicker of light, at ragged but regular intervals, with no more ceremony or consideration than that.

He checked that his son was still sleeping deeply, then poured himself a plastic cup of neat bourbon and went down to the pool to smoke and sit alone for a while in the dark. He walked toward a group of pool chairs in the shadows beside a stunted palm, but stopped when he realized that he wasn't alone, that someone was sitting in one of the chairs. The Gypsy woman sat very still, watching him.

"Come, sit," she said. "Don't be afraid."

He was afraid. But the woman was so still, and the expression on her face he could now make out in the shadows was one of calm appraisal. Something about this kept him from retreating. She slowly raised a hand and patted the pool chair next to her, and Loomis sat.

For a moment, the woman just looked at him, and, unable not to, he looked at her. She was unexpectedly, oddly attractive. Her eyes were indeed very dark, set far apart on her broad face. In this light, her fierce nose was strange and alarming, almost erotic.

"Are you Gypsy?" Loomis blurted, without thinking.

She stared at him a second before smiling and chuckling deep in her throat.

"No, I'm not Gypsy," she said, her eyes moving quickly from side to side in little shiftings, looking into his. "We are American. My people come from France."

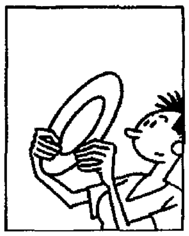
Loomis said nothing.

"But I can tell you your future," she said, leaning her head back slightly to look at him down her harrowing nose. "Let me see your hand." She took Loomis's wrist and pulled his palm toward her. He didn't resist. "Have you ever had someone read your palm?"

Loomis shook his head. "I don't really want to know my future," he said. "I'm not a very optimistic person."

"I understand," the woman said. "You're unsettled."

"It's too dark here to even see my palm," Loomis said.



"No, there's enough light," the woman said. And finally she took her eyes from Loomis's and looked down at his palm. He felt relieved enough to be released from that gaze to let her continue. And something in him was relieved, too, to have someone else consider his future, someone aside from himself. It couldn't be worse, after all, than his own predictions.

She hung her head over his palm and traced the lines with a long fingernail, pressed into the fleshy parts. Her thick hair tickled the edges of his hand and wrist. After a moment, much sooner than Loomis would have expected, she spoke.

"It's not the future you see in a palm," she said, still studying his. "It's a person's nature. From this, of course, one can tell much about a person's tendencies." She looked up, still gripping his wrist. "This tells us much about where a life may have been, and where it may go."

She bent over his palm again, traced one of the lines with the fingernail. "There are many breaks in the heart line here. You are a creature of disappointment. I suspect others in your life disappoint you." She traced a different line. "You're a dreamer. You're an idealist, possibly. Always disappointed by ordinary life, which of course is boring and ugly." She laughed that soft, deep chuckle again and looked up, startling Loomis anew with the directness of her gaze. "People are so fucking disappointing, eh?" She uttered a seductive grunt that loosened something in his groin.

It was true. No one had ever been good enough for him. Not even the members of his immediate family. And especially himself.

"Anger, disappointment," the woman said. "So common. But it may be they've worn you down. The drinking, smoking. No real energy, no passion." Loomis pulled against her grip just slightly, but she held on with strong fingers around his wrist. Then she lowered Loomis's palm to her broad lap and leaned in closer, speaking more quietly.

"I see you with the little boy—he's your child?"

Loomis nodded. He felt suddenly alarmed, fearful. He glanced up, and his heart raced when he thought he saw the boy standing on the balcony, looking out. It was only the potted plant there. He wanted to dash back to the room, but he was rooted to the chair, to the Gypsy with her thin, hard fingers about his wrist.

"This is no vacation, I suspect. It's terrible, to see your child in this way, in a motel."

Loomis nodded.

"You're angry with this child's mother for forcing you to be here."

Loomis nodded and tried to swallow. His throat was dry.

"Yet I would venture it was you who left her. For another woman, a beautiful woman, eh, *mon frère*?" She ran the tip of a nail down one of the lines in his palm. There was a cruel smile on her impossible face. "A woman who once again you believed to be something she was not." Loomis felt himself drop his chin in some kind of involuntary acquiescence. "She was a dream," the woman said. "And she has disappeared, poof, like any dream." He felt suddenly, embarrassingly, close to tears. A tight lump swelled in his throat. "And now you have left her, too, or she has left you, because"—and here the woman paused, shook Loomis's wrist gently, as if to revive his attention, and indeed he had been drifting in his grief—"because you are a ghost. Walking between two worlds, you know?" She shook his wrist again, harder, and Loomis looked up at her, his vision of her there in the shadows blurred by his tears.

She released his wrist and sat back in her chair, exhaled as if she had been holding her breath, and closed her eyes. As if this excoriation of Loomis's character had been an obligation, had exhausted her.

They sat there for a minute or two while Loomis waited for the emotion that had surged up in him to recede.

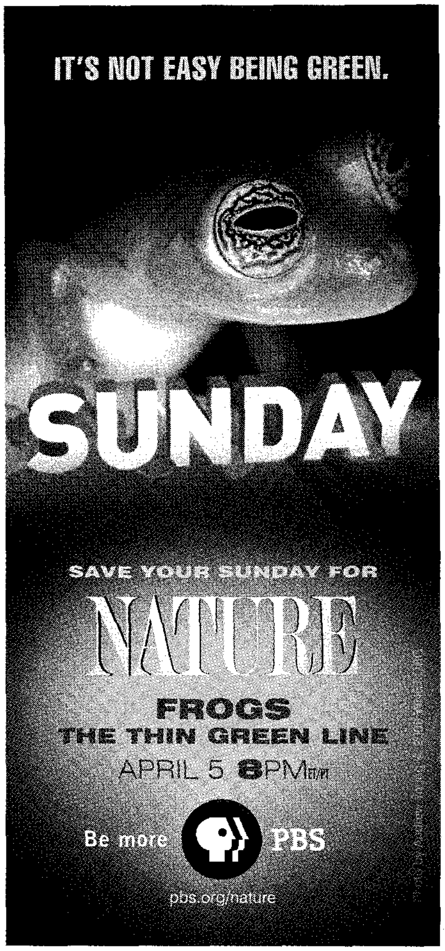
"Twenty dollars," the woman said, her eyes still closed. When Loomis said nothing, she opened her eyes. Now her gaze was flat, no longer intense, but she held it on him. "Twenty dollars," she said. "For the reading. This is my fee."

Loomis, feeling as if he'd just been through something physical instead of emotional, his muscles tingling, reached for his wallet, found a twenty-dollar bill, and handed it to her. She took it and rested her hands in her lap.

"Now you should go back up to your room," she said.

He got up to make his way from the courtyard, and was startled by someone standing in the shadow of the Gypsies' doorway. Her evil man-child, the boy from the pool, watching him like a forest animal pausing in its night prowling to let him pass. Loomis hurried on up to the room, tried to let himself in with a key card that wouldn't coöperate. The lock kept flashing red instead of green. Finally the card worked, the green light flickered. He entered and shut the door behind him.

But he'd gone into the wrong room, maybe even some other motel. The beds were made, the television off. His son wasn't there. The sliding glass door to the balcony stood open. Loomis felt his heart seize up and he rushed to the railing. The courtyard was dark and empty. Over in the lobby, the lights were dimmed, no one on duty. It was all shut down. There was no breeze. No roar of rushing vehicles from the 5, the roar in Loomis's mind cancelling it out. By the time he heard the sound behind him and turned to see his son come out of the bathroom yawning, it was too late. It might as well have been someone else's child, Loomis the stranger come to steal him away. He stood on the balcony and watched his son crawl back onto the bed, pull himself into a fetal position, close his eyes for a moment, then open them. Meeting his gaze, Loomis felt something break inside him. The boy had the same dazed, disoriented expression he'd had on his face just after his long, difficult birth, when the nurses had put him into an incubator to rush him to intensive care. Loomis had knelt, then, his face up close to the incubator's glass wall, and he'd known that the baby could see him, and that was enough. The obstetrician said, "This baby is very sick," and nurses wheeled the incubator out. He'd gone over to his wife and held her hand. The resident, tears in her eyes, patted his shoulder and said, for some reason, "You're good people," and left them alone. Now he and the child were in this motel, the life that had been their family somehow dissipated into air. Loomis couldn't gather into his mind how they'd got here. He couldn't imagine what would come next. ♦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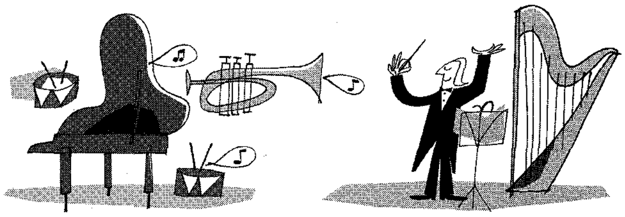


## BOOKS

# A NERVOUS SPLENDOR

*The Wittgenstein family had a genius for misery.*

### BY ANTHONY GOTTLIEB

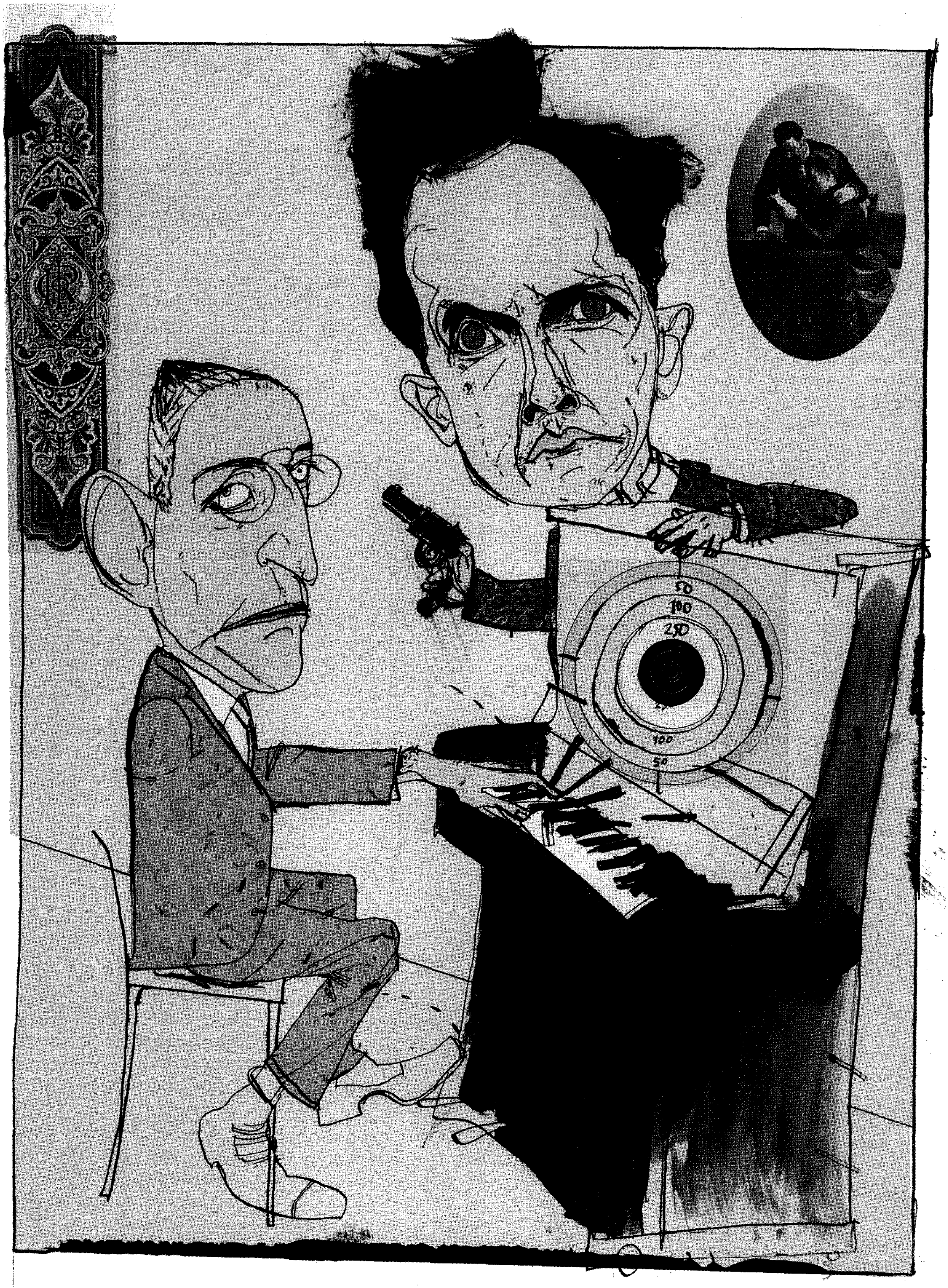
The family of Karl Wittgenstein, who was one of Austria's richest men when he died, in 1913, may deserve some gloomy sort of prize, the Palm of Atreus, perhaps. His youngest child, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, once asked a pupil if he had ever had any tragedies in his life. The pupil, evidently well trained, inquired what he meant by "tragedy." "I mean suicides, madness, or quarrels," replied Ludwig, three of whose four brothers committed suicide, two of them (Rudi and Hans) in their early twenties, and the third (Kurt) at the age of forty. Ludwig often thought of doing so, as did his surviving brother, Paul. A budding concert pianist when he lost his right arm to a Russian bullet, in 1914, Paul was imprisoned for a time in the infamous Siberian fortress where Dostoyevsky had set his novel "The House of the Dead." Ludwig later claimed to have first entertained thoughts of suicide at around the age of ten, before any of his brothers had died. There were three sisters: Gretl, Helene, and Hermine. Hermine, the eldest child (she was born in 1874; Ludwig, the youngest, arrived fifteen years later), and the guardian of her father's flame, never married. Helene was highly neurotic, and had a husband who suffered from dementia. Gretl was regarded as irritating by most people, including her unpleasant husband, who committed suicide, as did his father and one of his aunts. Bad temper and extreme nervous tension were endemic in the family. One day, when Paul was practicing at one of the seven grand pianos in their winter home, the Palais Wittgenstein, he leaped up and shouted at his brother Ludwig in the room next door, "I cannot play when you are in the house, as I feel your skepticism seeping towards me from under the door!"

All of this was before the Nazis got to work. The Wittgenstein children were brought up as Christians, but they counted as full Jews under the Nuremberg racial laws because three of their grandparents had been born Jewish and did not convert to Christianity until they reached adulthood. (The fourth, their maternal grandmother, had no Jewish ancestry.) After Germany annexed Austria, in 1938, the family money bought the lives of the three sisters—Paul had escaped, and Ludwig was safe in England—but at the cost of estranging several of the surviving siblings from one another. A few days before the invasion of Poland, in 1939, Hitler found the time to issue an order granting half-breed status to the Wittgenstein children, on the pretext that their paternal grandfather had been the bastard son of a German prince. Nobody believed this tale, but the arrangement enabled the German Reichsbank to claim all the gold and much of the foreign currency and stocks held in Switzerland by a Wittgenstein trust. The negotiations for this exchange seem to have involved a secret pact in which Gretl and Hermine sided with Nazi officials against Paul. After the war, Paul performed with his single hand at a concert in Vienna but did not visit Hermine, who was dying there; Ludwig and Paul had no contact after 1939; nor did Paul and Gretl. This was not a happy family.

Alexander Waugh, the author of "The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War" (Doubleday; $28.95), is no stranger to family sagas. He belongs to the fourth generation of an English literary dynasty that includes the novelist Evelyn Waugh, who was his grandfather; his previous book, "Fathers and Sons," is a memoir of the Waughs. The publishers of "The House of Wittgenstein" compare the "novelistic richness" of its style to Thomas Mann's first novel, "Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family," which was published in 1901. In fact, there are more than stylistic similarities between the Wittgensteins of Vienna and Mann's invented north-German merchant dynasty. In Mann's novel, the vitality and the solid businesslike virtues of the Buddenbrook family are sapped by introspection, homosexuality, loss of interest in commerce, overindulgence in art, and illness. If Karl Wittgenstein ever read it, he must have nodded in recognition. In a memoir that Hermine wrote in the nineteen-forties, she noted the "lack of vitality and will for life" that set her brothers apart from their father, and described his bitter disappointment that none of them wanted to continue his work in business. Like his wife and his children, Karl was highly musical, but he found his son Hans's obsession with music to be morbid and strictly limited the amount of time the boy was allowed to play. Hans was a prodigy whose extraordinary musical perception became evident at the age of four; Gustav Mahler's teacher, Julius Epstein, called him a genius. But Karl insisted that he follow a career in industry or finance. Rudi and Ludwig were homosexual, and Hans may have been, too.

There the parallels end. Thomas Mann traced the decline of the Buddenbrooks through four generations, but the Wittgensteins rose and fell within the span of two. Karl more or less built the family fortune himself. He was no stolid merchant but an audacious risk-taker, and something of a rebel in early life. At the age of seventeen, he absconded to New York, where he arrived in the spring

ABOVE: LENE DUE-JENSEN; OPPOSITE: DAVID HUGHES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*Paul became a concert pianist despite losing an arm, and Ludwig shared his iron will. Yet their three brothers killed themselves.*

of 1865 with a violin and no money. He worked as a waiter, then, among other things, he played in a minstrel band, a gig that came to an abrupt end when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in a theatre and musical performances were banned. Karl was too ashamed to write to his family or answer their letters. It was only when he got a steady job as a teacher at a college in upstate New York that he recovered enough pride to agree to return.

His father was a land agent and a trader, and at first Karl was put to work on one of his rented farms. Then he briefly enrolled in Vienna's Technical University. After dropping out, he took a series of engineering jobs. Energy and intelligence got him into management, audacious deal-making took him higher, and some capital from his wife (he married in 1874) provided the first grains of powder for an explosive entrepreneurial rampage. Waugh says that Karl Wittgenstein was a chancer, whose enormous fortune owed as much to the favorable outcomes of his gambles as to his hard work and his skills. That is implausible; nobody has quite such a consistent run of good luck. Karl was adept at swinging the odds in his own favor, and he knew exactly which chances to take—in particular, he appreciated the significance of technology more keenly than his competitors did. Announcing his death, in 1913, *The Economist* wrote that "the Austrian iron and steel trade owes its rapid growth and development solely to him."

Newspaper articles by Karl Wittgenstein show that he believed in unfettered capitalism (though not in free trade) and was opposed to any legislation aimed at protecting consumers from cartels or fraud. Such laws, in his opinion, would interfere with the crucial work of vigorous entrepreneurs, who would ultimately raise the standard of living for everybody. An early master of the leveraged buyout, he no doubt cut some corners while assembling his ingeniously integrated empire of mines, iron- and steelworks, and hardware factories. He certainly reaped the benefits of monopoly wherever he could find them. In February of 1900, *The Economist's* Austria-Hungary correspondent reported from Vienna that Herr Wittgenstein would "soon have the power of fixing iron prices in Hungary also, as he fixes them in Austria."

Karl was no philanthropist on the scale of his American friend Andrew Carnegie. He was more of a patron—one of the main supporters of the Secession, Vienna's Art Nouveau movement led by Gustav Klimt (who painted a portrait of Gretl, which she did not like). But the family's cultural life really centered on the grand Musiksaal on the first floor of their main house. Brahms was a family friend. He dedicated his violin concerto to Karl's first cousin Joseph Joachim, whose famous quartet played in the Musiksaal several times each year. Richard Strauss came and performed duets with the young Paul. Schoenberg attended the soirées several times; Mahler, whose music Ludwig later dismissed as "worthless," once attended but was not invited again after he left before the end of the evening's entertainment.

Music was more than entertainment for the Wittgensteins, though, and more than art. For one thing, it became a store of value. Pages from the Wittgenstein collection of autographed musical manuscripts flutter through this wonderfully told story. Scores by Brahms, Schubert, Wagner, and Bruckner are stuffed in a potting shed by a quick-thinking servant while an art historian from the Gestapo rummages through Gretl's house. A Bach cantata, two Mozart piano concertos, a Haydn symphony, and one of Beethoven's last piano sonatas are smuggled to Ludwig in Cambridge, where he places them in a bank safe-deposit box. Gretl's younger son hides Schubert's "Die Forelle," Brahms's "Handel Variations," some Beethoven letters, Wagner's sketches for "Die Walküre," and more, under a pile of socks in his suitcase, and heads for the Vienna railway station. Music was also, Waugh writes, the only effective way in which the Wittgenstein children could communicate with their shy, nervous, and intensely musical mother. And music provided consolation and distraction from the tragedies of the family, about which they were mostly required to remain silent.

Sometime in 1901, Hans fled from his father and went to America, much as his own father had done thirty-six years earlier. In 1902, he disappeared, by most accounts, from a boat, which may have been in the Chesapeake Bay, perhaps on the Orinoco River in Venezuela, or in several other places. Wherever it was, no one doubted that he had committed suicide. Hans's disappearance was a banned topic. Rudi was a twenty-two-year-old chemistry student in Berlin when he walked into a bar on a May evening in 1904, requested a sentimental song from the pianist, and then mixed potassium cyanide into a glass of milk and died in agony. The suicide note left for his parents said that he had been grieving over the death of a friend. A more likely explanation is that he thought he was identifiable as the subject of a published case study about homosexuality. After Rudi's funeral, Karl forbade the family to mention him ever again. Waugh thinks that this enforced silence, which the dutiful Mrs. Wittgenstein supported, created a permanent rift between parents and children. The exact circumstances of Kurt's suicide, which took place on the Italian front in 1918, are unknown. He was generally regarded as cheerful, but Hermine recorded that he seemed to carry "the germ of disgust for life within himself."

Perhaps it was because Paul, after he lost his right arm, had the most tangible affliction in the family that he found the focus to remake himself. His determination to succeed on the concert stage was, in part, inspired by the example of Josef Labor, a blind organist and composer who was a favorite of the Wittgenstein family. Géza Zichy, a one-armed Hungarian count whose pianism had enthralled Liszt, was another encouraging model. Zichy wrote a self-help book for amputees, which explained, among other things, how to eat a crayfish and remove one's underpants with only one arm. Paul worked furiously and ingeniously to develop techniques that would enable him to perform. The training began while he was still recovering from the amputation in a Russian prison hospital, tapping on a dummy keyboard that he had etched in charcoal on a crate. Later, on a real piano, he often practiced for up to seven hours at a sitting.

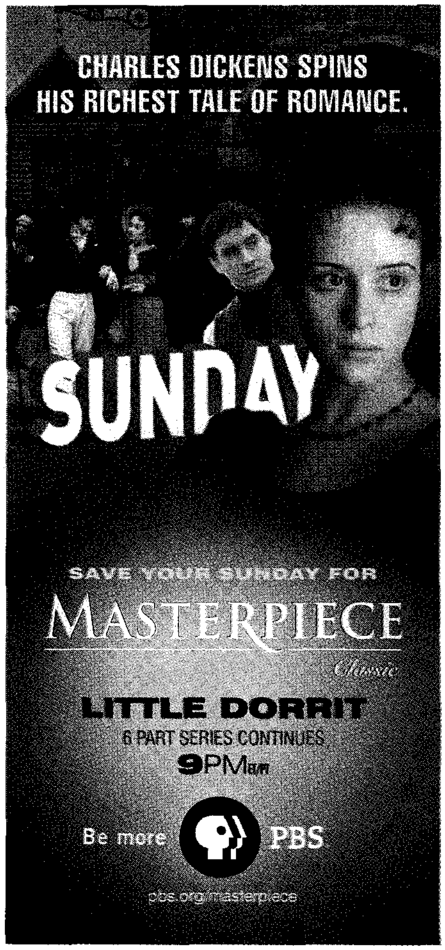
At the peak of his career, in the late nineteen-twenties and early thirties, Paul's concerts drew wildly enthusiastic reviews from respected critics; the Grove Dictionary of Music describes Paul as having had "an amazing virtuosity which enabled him to overcome difficulties formidable even for a two-handed pianist." During Ludwig's lifetime, the pianist brother—his elder by just two years—was much the more famous of the two. It's also true that Paul continued to perform after his abilities had declined, and his reputation declined accordingly. He made few recordings, and Waugh, who is also a composer and a music critic, remarks that most of them are bad.

His most lasting significance comes from having commissioned one-handed works from at least a dozen composers, including Richard Strauss, Sergei Prokofiev, Benjamin Britten, Paul Hindemith, and Maurice Ravel, whose Piano Concerto for the Left Hand remains widely performed. Strauss extracted a particularly large fee, and Britten, at least, affected to be in it just for the money. ("I have been commissioned by a man called Wittgenstein," Britten wrote to his sister. "He pays gold so I'll do it.") Paul often insisted on changes to the music, especially when he thought that the orchestra had been overscored and would drown out his playing. (Britten groused, "The man really is an old sour puss.") There was also a colorful dispute with Ravel, who complained for the rest of his life about his dealings with Paul. There was worse in store for poor Hindemith, who wrote his concerto in 1923: Paul couldn't understand the composition, so he filed it away. It was discovered eight decades later, in a Pennsylvania farmhouse that had belonged to Paul's widow, and given a belated world première by Leon Fleisher in Berlin in 2004. Paul couldn't fathom Prokofiev's concerto, either, and he shelved that, too. In 1950, Siegfried Rapp, a pianist who had lost his right arm in the Second World War, asked for permission to perform some of these works, many of which had been written a quarter of a century earlier. Paul usually bought exclusive performing rights for his commissions, and he said no. A few years later, Rapp obtained a copy of Prokofiev's concerto from his widow and went ahead, anyway, infuriating Paul.

It is hard to warm to Paul's refusal to let anyone else perform pieces that he wouldn't play himself. (He even felt betrayed by composers who wanted to rearrange his commissions to produce two-handed versions.) And, despite giving evidence of Paul's kindness and generosity to friends, pupils, and old retainers, Waugh makes no effort to conceal his hero's estrangement from the compromises that lubricate everyday life. Bertrand Russell once wrote of Ludwig that no one could be more "destitute of the false politeness that interferes with truth." This was at a time when Russell was still enraptured by the young Ludwig. Russell later grew less indulgent toward his erstwhile pupil, but he had identified a family characteristic: when they believed that an important principle was at stake—which, for them, was often—the Wittgensteins were not inclined to be nice.

Most of Paul's eccentricities were perhaps the normal ones for a loner who had been brought up amid vast wealth. He was a fiercely private man who liked to book entire railway carriages for himself, even when travelling with his family. His wife, Hilde, who was half blind and had been his pupil, bore him two children in Vienna before their marriage; the elder child had been conceived shortly after their first piano lesson, when Hilde was eighteen years old and Paul was forty-seven. Because Hilde was not Jewish, Paul was open to charges of "racial defilement," and in 1938 he fled Austria. When his wife and children arrived in the United States, in 1941, he set them up in a house on Long Island, which he visited on weekends from his apartment on Riverside Drive. Arriving in New York without a valet, he soon ran into trouble. When his clothes were stolen from a hotel—he had left them outside his room, presuming that someone would wash them—he sat around in bedsheets until a candidate for the post of personal assistant came up with the suggestion that more clothes be bought from a shop. She was hired. Another anecdote has him sallying forth into the street wearing a hat that was still attached to its box.

In the Wittgenstein family, it was not the philosopher who was the unworldly one. Ever since childhood, the last-born Ludwig had had a passion and a facility for mechanical things. At the age of ten, he constructed a working model of a sewing machine out of bits of wood and wire; while serving in the Austrian Army, he demonstrated a more dangerous practicality by improvising his own mortar in the field. After leaving school, Ludwig studied engineering in Berlin, specializing in hot-air balloons, and then moved to Man-



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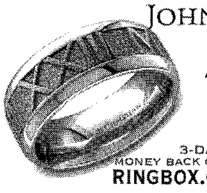

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chester to work on aeronautical engines; in 1910, he patented an improvement in propeller technology. It was then that he heard of Bertrand Russell's work on logic and decided to study with him in Cambridge.

Russell found him to be a tormented soul, unsure of his own abilities and unsure whether to be an engineer or a philosopher. Russell soon decided that Ludwig was the most perfect example of genius he had ever known, and persuaded him not to continue with engineering. "We expect the next big step in philosophy to be taken by your brother," Russell told Hermine. But he feared that his new pupil was on the brink of suicide, as he explained in a letter to his mistress, Lady Ottoline Morrell. Ottoline wrote back that hot chocolate would calm Ludwig's nerves, and enclosed a packet of cocoa tablets for Russell to give him.

If they ever reached Ludwig they did not do the trick. He continued to work with a feverish intensity on the problems of logic that he was discussing with Russell and to agonize about his life. The way those two topics were entangled in Ludwig's mind can be seen from his "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," a gnomic masterpiece that he completed as a soldier in 1918. The "Tractatus" is a mixture of logical symbols and mystical remarks in which Ludwig attempted to delineate the limits of language. Certain things could be expressed in language, and these were best understood in terms of the logical techniques developed by Russell, he maintained. But others—and these were the most important things in life—could not be expressed in language at all. Hence the book's famous closing line: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." The problems of philosophy could thus be dispatched by being divided into those that could be perspicuously rendered into Russellian logic, and thereby answered fairly easily, and those about which nothing could be said.

Frank Ramsey, one of Ludwig's most brilliant friends, who had reviewed the "Tractatus" in Britain's main philosophical journal as an undergraduate, quipped that "what we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either." Ramsey meant that Ludwig seemed to be cheating by trying to specify exactly what cannot be said. As it happens, Ludwig—who, unusually for a Wittgenstein, seems not to have mastered any musical instrument as a child—impressed his musical friends with displays of virtuoso whistling. Several Cambridge dons recalled hearing him whistle the solo part of an entire concerto while a pianist played the orchestral part. Whether or not Ramsey had this curious feat in mind, the Wittgensteins were certainly in the habit of using music to express what they couldn't say in words.

After the "Tractatus," having thus exhausted all philosophical problems, and been exhausted by them, Ludwig took a break. He worked as a schoolmaster for six years and then as an architect, designing and obsessively supervising the building of a house in Vienna for his sister Gretl. During the First World War, he had read Tolstoy's "The Gospel in Brief" and other writings that extolled the wisdom of peasants. Resolving to lead a simple life, he gave his share of the family money to three of his siblings; since they were very rich already, he believed they could not be corrupted further by receiving his portion. Then, in 1927, his interest in philosophy was rekindled. This time, his view of language changed—the emphasis on Russellian logic was gone—but one key idea remained the same. Both his old and his new philosophy shared an inspiration that he had come across as a teen-ager in "The Principles of Mechanics," by Heinrich Hertz, a German physicist. Hertz had suggested a novel way to deal with the puzzling concept of force in Newtonian physics: the best approach was not to try to define it but to restate Newton's theory in a way that eliminates any reference to force. Once this was done, according to Hertz, "the question as to the nature of force will not have been answered; but our minds, no longer vexed, will cease to ask illegitimate questions."

Ludwig's big idea was to apply this method to philosophical problems. In his "Tractatus," he had tried to show that some philosophical questions were illegitimate because they tried to say the unsayable. The new approach was gentler and more therapeutic. By painstakingly examining how language works in everyday life, Ludwig now believed that one could be cured of the misconceptions that give rise to philosophical puzzles, and thus stop worrying about them. That is what he toiled on, mostly in Cambridge, until his death, in 1951.

Does this actually work? Curiously, it is hard to say, because Ludwig seldom dealt explicitly with classical philosophical problems. His writings hardly ever mention the great philosophers of days gone by, except in passing. So one has to work out for oneself what, if any, bearing his explorations of the workings of language have on the ideas of Plato, Descartes, or Kant. Ludwig intended his technique to be revolutionary: "Why should philosophy in the age of airplanes and automobiles be the same as in the age when people travelled by coach or on foot?" the former aeronautical engineer asked. It remains a point of contention whether he really found an honest way to dispose of philosophical questions or merely succeeded in changing the subject of conversation by the sheer force of his personality.

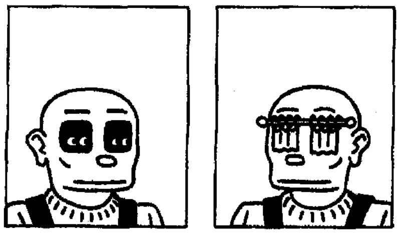
There's a telling description of genius by Arthur Schopenhauer, the German philosopher of romantic pessimism, whose work was well known to Ludwig, Paul, Gretl, and Hans: "Talent is like the marksman who hits a target which others cannot reach; genius is like the marksman who hits a target, as far as which others cannot even see." That seems to have been the Wittgenstein way: trying to hit targets that others could not see. But if ordinary mortals cannot spot the bull's-eye, how do they know whether it has been hit? According to Schopenhauer, they just have to accept the evidence of genius on faith, which is what Ludwig's admirers often did. When Ludwig attacked some of Russell's ideas, Russell wrote to Ottoline Morrell, "I couldn't understand his objection—in fact he was very inarticulate—but I feel in my bones that he must be right." Other philosophers who met Ludwig reported the same feeling.

It's tempting to come away from the Wittgenstein saga with the thought that Karl, if only he had lived long enough, would have acknowledged the iron-willed independence of Paul and Ludwig as a reflection of his own, and given them his blessing. But that would probably be expecting too much of him. Tragic or not, no family has room for more than one Wittgenstein. ♦

# BRIEFLY NOTED

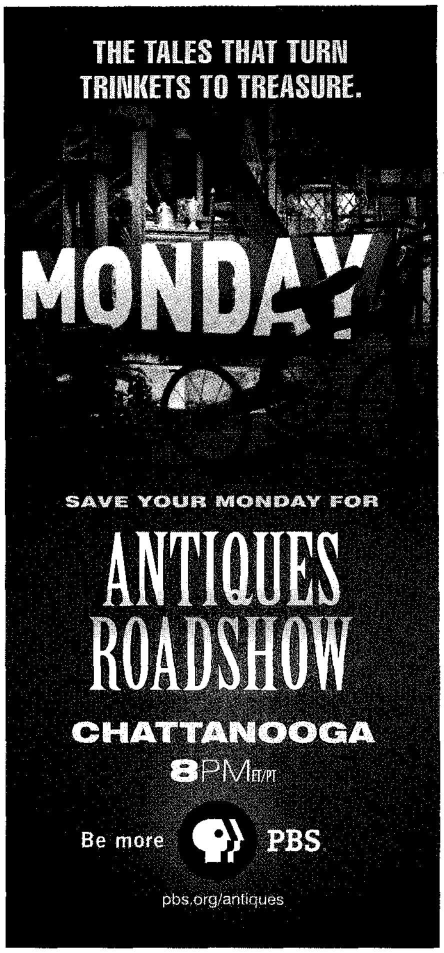
The Believers, *by Zoë Heller (Harper; $25.99).* Set in New York City in 2002, with the terror of September 11th still fresh and the confrontation with Iraq starting to take shape, this searing comic novel takes on hypocrisy of all kinds. Joel Litvinoff, a noted radical lawyer, suffers a stroke while in court defending a Muslim man accused of terrorist activity. His hospital room becomes the center of an orbit of women: his wife, Audrey, who clings to the diminishing hope that he will emerge from his coma; his daughters, Rosa and Karla; and Berenice, a photographer with whom he secretly had a child. As with Heller's previous novel, "What Was She Thinking?," no one is entirely likable. Audrey is angry and cruel; Rosa priggish; Karla slovenly and timid; Berenice self-satisfied. Heller's talent lies in the way she illuminates her characters, often with dazzling insight, without making excuses or offering redemption.

The Good Parents, *by Joan London (Black Cat; $14.95).* A girl from the Australian outback heads to Melbourne and, in thrall to the idea of having a secret, grownup life, runs off with her older, married boss, a shady businessman who, she recognizes, has little genuine feeling for her. This is just an overture to the novel's central story, in which the girl's parents, in the wake of their daughter's disappearance, confront their own youthful rebellions—the mother's early romance with a gangster, the father's hippie wanderings—and the inchoate ideals that led them to bury themselves in a rural backwater. The author comes at her characters from every angle, laying bare their compromises and delusions. Shifting between landscapes worldly and remote, she pulls off the tricky feat of making the act of reflection suspenseful, turning the past into a living, unfinished thing, still bristling with what could be.



Store Front, *by James T. Murray and Karla L. Murray (Gingko; $65).* New York's storefronts constitute the city's vernacular architecture, shaping the look and feel of the five boroughs no less than more celebrated elements of the skyline. These unfussy, elegant, and richly colored photographs of butcher shops, bakeries, fabric wholesalers, *cuchifritos* stands, stationery and sporting-goods stores, laundromats, groceries, and dive bars give connoisseurs of signage, folk typography, and ambient erosion much to pore over. Shops that opened in the nineteen-seventies now look as ancient as those dating back to the twenties. The tone is elegiac as much as it is celebratory; interviews with shop owners make it clear how close to extinction many of them stand, and the photographers report that nearly a third of these businesses have gone under in the time that it took to make the book.

Potato, *by John Reader (Yale; $28).* This enjoyably meandering history looks at the potato as a plant of paradox. It has been revered as an aphrodisiac and feared as a cause of leprosy. Populations rise dramatically wherever it is introduced, but reliance on it "ensnares more people in poverty than it lifts out." Reader traces the evolution of the potato from poisonous Andean weed to global staple, offering adept disquisitions on whatever captures his attention: the mysterious origins of agriculture, the economic history of Peru, the domestic arrangements of the Irish. There are glimpses of the Reign of Terror, when the ornamental gardens of the Tuileries Palace were planted with potatoes, and the Great Potato Boom of 1903 and 1904, when an investment bubble grew as a result of false claims made for a potato strain known as Eldorado. This is a story of invisible systems and unintended consequences, concerned with how the New World transformed the Old.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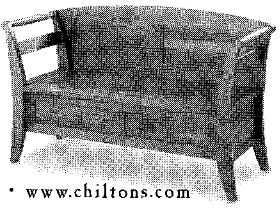

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## THE ART WORLD

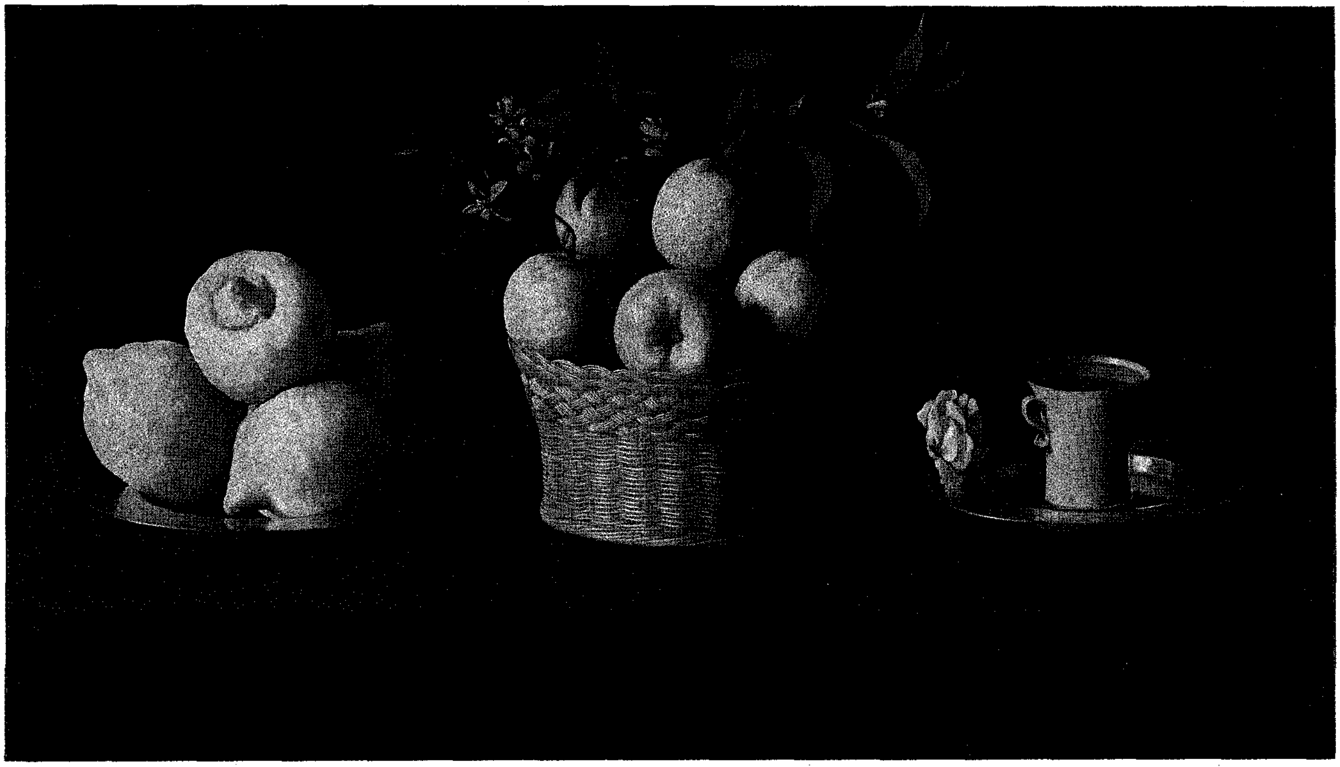
# BEARING FRUIT

*Norton Simon's taste in paintings.*

### BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

We know what a great painting looks like while we are looking at one. Turning away, we don't exactly forget, but our recall of the experience—how we felt, looking—starts to edit what we saw. Some details and qualities are magnified; others evanesce. With time, the picture becomes ever more ours and less the painter's. My several visits to the best painting in the world, Velázquez's "Las Meninas" (1656), at the Prado, instruct me in the phenomenon. My first reaction is always disappointment at the coarse, almost drab, handmadeness of the big (but smaller than I thought) canvas, the absence of a glamour that I have cherished in memory and may have refreshed by contemplating glossy reproductions. (Reproductions are pandering ghosts; they tell us what we like to believe.) Then, rather abruptly, I find myself under Velázquez's spell again, as if I had never been before—pitying the fool that I must have been when I last viewed the work. This time I get it! But will I keep it? Not a chance. The moment I am back out on the streets of Madrid, my memory will have begun complicating, with my heart's incorrigible partialities, the simplicity of naked brushy paint that describes a little girl, at the center of a courtly society on a certain day, being offered a red glass of something.

Encountering one of the five canvases in "Masterpieces of European Painting from the Norton Simon Museum," a pithy loan show at the Frick Collection, has shocked me with really embarrassing proof of my memory's fecklessness. The painting is a supreme work by Velázquez's contemporary, friend, and sometime peer Francisco de Zurbarán. (Both were from Seville. Velázquez landed the nation's plum job of court painter; Zurbarán subsisted on religious commissions.) "Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose" (1633), the artist's only signed and dated still-life, amounts to three pictures, side by side, in one: a silver plate holding four citrons (baggy, nubbly cousins of lemons); several oranges with stems, leaves, and blossoms, heaped in a basket; and a two-handled gray ceramic cup, apparently filled with water, on another silver plate, with a pale-pink rose facing it from the plate's lip. The objects rest on an oxblood-brown table against a pitch-black ground; sunlight rakes them from the left. Scholars speculate that they allegorize virtues of the Virgin Mary (citrons for faithfulness, water for purity, and so on—allegory bores me). Certainly, there is a sense of conceptual rigor in the work's rebuslike presentation, which invests ordinary comestibles on a piece of domestic furniture with the gravitas of a sacrificial altar. I was overwhelmed when I saw the citrons in the picture, many years ago, at the Simon, in Pasadena, California (inch for inch, the finest collection of European paintings west of the Mississippi). Ever since, they have served me as a touchstone of painterly potency. I was pleased to discover, at the Frick, that my mental image of them had been close to photographic. No nuance of the dusky russet shadows and tiny


*"Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose" (1633), by Francisco de Zurbarán, is on loan at the Frick.*

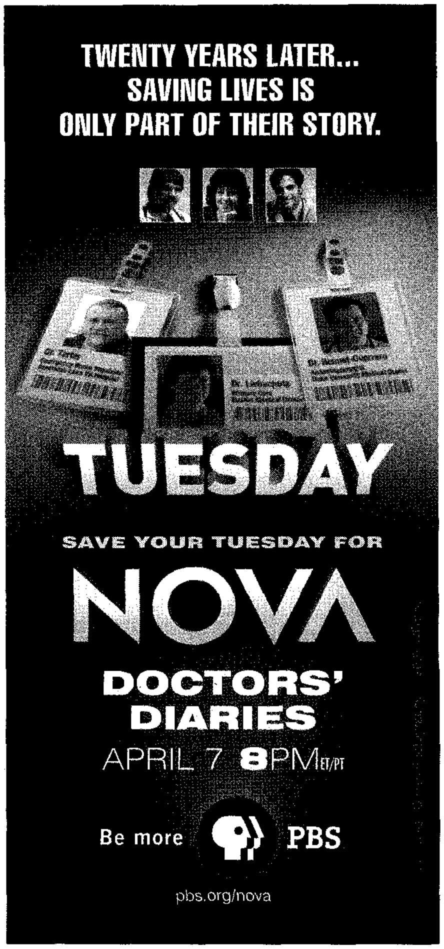
COURTESY NORTON SIMON FOUNDATION

green inflections, in the fruit's soprano yellow, surprised me. But the other objects registered with a jolt: I didn't remember any oranges, basket, cup, or rose. My recollection had amputated two-thirds of a tour de force.

Well, yellow is my favorite color. And the painting's other, more muted hues were likely dim prior to a recent cleaning. But current brain science affords me a less pathetic excuse. Research has confirmed what experience posits: strongly emotional events linger in vivid but narrowly focussed memory, etching certain facts—a gun pointed at you, say—while occluding pretty much everything incidental to them (such as the color of the gunman's hair, or whether he had any). In fact, this work still strikes me as principally about those citrons, never mind their impeccable companions. The fruit's fierce materiality and celestial beauty channel the essence of the artist's national, historical, and personal genius. The distinctly Iberian black background is part of it. (Any painter who uses black as a color should have to pay a royalty, for the privilege, to Spain—as Manet effectually did, in his forthright emulations of Velázquez.) Likewise telling, about the style, is a distilled spirit of the Counter-Reformation. Zurbarán was one of that feverish pietism's chief visual propagandists after El Greco.

Zurbarán's brand of rhapsodic austerity faded in mid-seventeenth-century Spain. Also in the Frick show is a sumptuous painting by the sweet-tempered Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, who ousted him, late in his career, from clerical favor. "The Birth of St. John the Baptist" (c. 1660) teases softly glowing figures, including a rumpus of putti, from ambient blackness, with baby John, at the center, managing to be realistically infantile while conveying, by look and gesture, that he can't wait to get started prophesying. Like many people I know, I've been repelled at times by Murillo's winsomeness—I could do without the onlooking fuzzy puppy in this picture—but, if decadence in art is ever forgivable (it is), he commands admiration. The three other Simon treasures on show are "The Flight Into Egypt" (c. 1544-45), by Jacopo Bassano, a rushing action scene in top-drawer Venetian color and decorative and narrative technique; "The Holy Women at the Sepulchre" (c. 1611-14), an unusually restrained but familiarly exciting and wacky Rubens, in which women confronted by two beefy angels look unimpressed, except for one, who leans out, simpering, and seems to wave "Hi!"; and Guercino's "Aldrovandi Dog" (c. 1625), a low-angled, monumental portrait of a brindle-and-white mastiff posed on a balustrade against a twilight sky and a verdant landscape with palatial towers. The animal sports a heraldic collar and valorous scars. All five works abound in what auctioneers term "wall power."

The business tycoon Norton Simon, who collected art from 1954 until his death, in 1993, frankly followed the prodigious model of Henry Clay Frick. (Frick, a half century earlier, patronized the prince of dealers, Lord Joseph Duveen; in 1964, Simon bought an option on the entire remaining inventory of Duveen Brothers.) But the two men differed in temperament. Simon's evident relishing of drama, eroticism, and strong color, often in figure compositions, challenges Frick's penchant for relative quietude, propriety, and subtlety, his tilt toward portraiture and landscape. Four of the Simons here are Baroque, a period downplayed at the Frick, and the fifth, the Bassano, is slam-bang Mannerist. Their incursion slightly suggests a street gang crashing a tea party—the rowdies, accustomed to preëminence on their home turf, a bit daunted by the invincible cool of the host company but irrepressibly cocky. They are not made altogether welcome. I fancied an irritable shudder in the Frick's sensitively indefinite Chardin, "Still Life with Plums" (c. 1730), at the blazing Zurbarán's sudden proximity. (This came with a revived savor of Chardin's brooding concentration.) The abrasive match of two formidably refined tastes affirms the superiority, for aesthetic enjoyment, of intact private collections over the committee-screened, canonical hit parades of standard museums, where even, or especially, the greatest works feel more officiously endorsed than actively valued. After all, amateur enthusiasm is our one trusty route to communion with the Old Masters, whose original social and spiritual functions have long since gone obscure, if not obsolete (though nothing can be wholly lost that lives in art). It helps a lot when the spectre of a particular person, who particularly loved particular things, stands at our shoulder, urging attention, inviting cordial argument, and marvelling at our shared good luck, to be so extraordinarily entertained. ♦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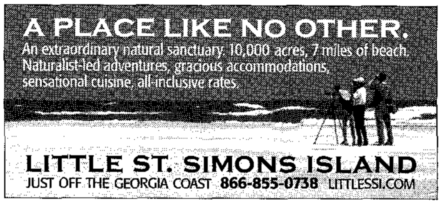
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### THE THEATRE

# WARMONGERS

*Battling death, armies, and one's own preoccupations.*

### BY HILTON ALS

*Ambrose, Rush, and Sarandon in "Exit the King." Photograph by Martin Schoeller.*

"What the fuck was that!!" King Berenger the First (Geoffrey Rush) exclaims midway through "Exit the King" (at the Barrymore). A storm—brief but "King Lear"-like in its intensity—has just hit his bare-bones, broken-down kingdom, flooding it with light, and then plunging it into momentary darkness. This happened as the King was trying to get to his oversized throne. To do what? Make the proclamations that define his rapidly disappearing self; he wouldn't know himself without his list of demands—demands that very few in his intimate circle have any interest in meeting just now. But let him make them. His country is already ruined, and what can his selfishness matter in the context of death? This more-than-four-century-old recalcitrant man-child, with his puppet joints and clown nose, is dying; he'll live, he has been informed, only until the end of the performance.

The King is the victim of no particular disease but time. The older of his two wives, Queen Marguerite (Susan Sarandon), anticipates his rapid deterioration with the knowing voice of a medical officer who is no stranger to death. ("Don't worry, Doctor," she says. "All his twists and turns and sidetracks . . . all to be expected, part of the program.") Her understanding of her husband is a result both of her intuition and of the years she spent with him. She can accept what the King's beloved, younger wife, Queen Marie (Lauren Ambrose), cannot: that death is life's first cousin. Queen Marie is too busy acting like a little girl—or, more accurately, acting the role of wife as little girl—to bother with the philosophical exigencies of her husband's imminent passing. She can grasp his existence only as it relates to her comfort and her image of herself.

"Exit the King" takes place, first and foremost, in a kind of jumpy, excited intellectual space—the theatre of its author's imagination. Written by the Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco (1909-94) in 1962, the piece emerges from its author's belief in what he called "imaginative truth" in theatre; that is, a disavowal of "everyday reality." Whereas Samuel Beckett, another chief proponent of the theatre of the absurd, tried to describe meaninglessness, Ionesco aimed to deflate power for power's sake, to expose men's intellectual and emotional greed.

Brilliantly directed by Neil Armfield, "Exit the King" introduces us to the major players as they stride across the stage, waving at the audience, as if greeting the paparazzi. After fulfilling their public duty to be adored, they retreat into their home, where we catch glimpses of the characters beneath their calcified public masks. There is no pretense to naturalism. Armfield wants us to know, straight off, that the play that Ionesco wrote—lovingly and well translated for this production by Armfield and Rush—is as much about performance as anything else. Ionesco once said that plays were not literature; he meant his to be, in a sense, springboards for the actors' imaginations. The actors here, kicking aside their too long trains on a tapestry-strung stage (the thoughtful set and costumes, by Dale Ferguson, use dark hues and deep reds that bring to mind Julian Schnabel's paintings), inhabit the space as though they were simultaneously inside and outside it. They love Ionesco's language, but they know that the Master didn't want constrictive realistic readings of it. So they perform little pirouettes around his concrete poetry. Rush and Ambrose are especially astonishing at this. While Ionesco's plays have a tendency to overdescribe the action as it's happening, Ambrose and Rush convey the absurdity of *talking this way*, in such hyper-theatricalized speech. They're interested in exposing the rigor behind the presentation, and in deflating the ridiculous notion that we ever present a true self to the world. Still, they make the audience comfortable with this entirely unexpected Broadway fare.

Part of the pleasure of watching the show is marvelling that it made it to Broadway at all. But placing this delicate world of ideas alongside the musicals and canned dramas of the boulevard is exactly the kind of thing that Ionesco loved to do: upset our traditional notions of theatre and remind us of the difficult and joyful process of suspending disbelief. The joke for Ionesco, Armfield, and the actors is that they *know* their world is artificial. What's real is their attempt to convince us otherwise.

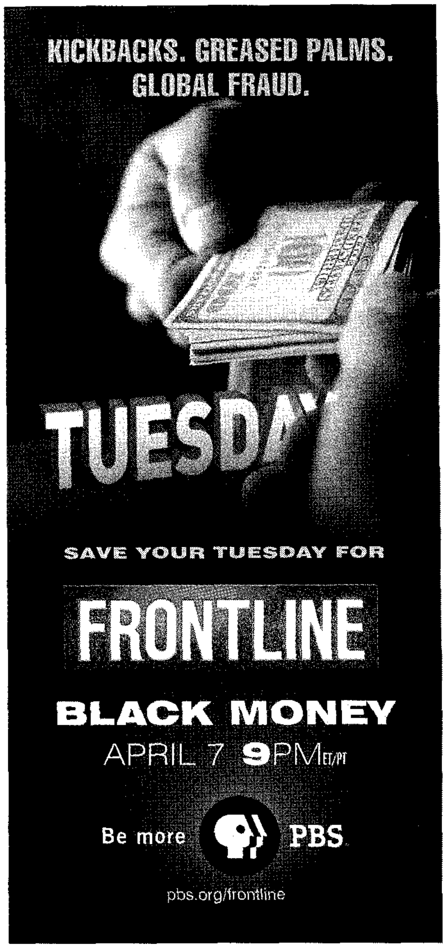
Life at court, of course, would scarcely be possible without war. Kingdoms set out to conquer other kingdoms, plundering wealth and amassing territory, all in an attempt to acquire power—and prominence in history. The experimental playwright Richard Maxwell uses the days after the 1403 Battle of Shrewsbury as a jumping-off point for his new work, "People Without History" (at the Performing Garage, under the direction of Brian Mendes). The first character we meet is Alice (Tory Vazquez), a woman in a light-colored woollen vest, with her hair parted and pinned back—a vaguely medieval look. She tells the audience:

> The battle. I keep thinking back on it. I can't tell what happened, because it didn't seem real. I have these fragments, but they are just impressions. Battle! Flash! Blam! Blam! If there was strategy, I couldn't suss it. Chaos to me. As though it didn't happen. Need to see it again to make it real.

History on rewind. The speech is signature Maxwell: personality emerges from the speaker's colloquial rhythm, which is itself embedded in a barely suppressed sadness, flatly expressed.

Alice is the only woman in this world of men at war. And after she encounters three knights, Owain, Mendace, and Rhobert (Tom King, Pete Simpson, and Jim Fletcher), as they are carting off their prisoners, Blunt and Sheriff (Bob Feldman and Alex Delinois), to a makeshift jail, the men demand that she become their archetype of womanhood: providing sustenance, emotional and otherwise, as she prepares their meals and they take control of her body. But to use the word "emotional" in the context of Maxwell's universe is misleading. Like the late filmmaker Robert Bresson, who forbade his performers to "act," Maxwell places similar restraints on those who appear in his shows, emphasizing their awkwardness and inexpressiveness, so that we concentrate not on the performance but on the language as a "thing." This approach is bound to make audiences uneasy, but one should think of oneself not as being held hostage to Maxwell's style but as being expanded by its difference.

Zachary Oberzan is a thirty-five-year-old performer currently living in a two-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot apartment in Manhattan. There, he contemplates war. But not just any war. He's specifically interested in the novel "First Blood," and in the 1982 action flick it inspired, starring Sylvester Stallone as the Vietnam War vet John Rambo. For ninety-five minutes, in "Rambo Solo" (at the Soho Rep), an execrable piece conceived by Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper, who head the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, we watch as Oberzan runs around the narrow stage that substitutes for his apartment (much of the audience sits on pillows on the floor, perhaps to give us a sense of what hanging out at Oberzan's place might feel like), acting out the movie in a grating, Stallone-inflected accent and providing more commentary than anyone could stand. As Oberzan demands our attention—he barely takes a breath—we are confronted with video projections of the actor, actually in his apartment, doing the same things we're watching him do live. Anger mounts at the sheer hubris of this enterprise. It may be a commentary on the nature of performance, but it is itself an utterly objectionable one, reflective only of a certain kind of chic-inflected privileged-white-boy solipsism. Watching "Rambo Solo," you learn less than nothing about absurdist theatre, but, as you leave the show, you may feel absurd for having sat through it. ♦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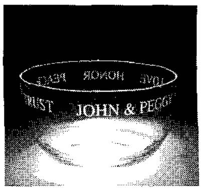
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POP MUSIC

# THE LONGEST RUN

*An old band whose new songs always get the most applause.*

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

In thirty-three years of existence, U2 has sold more than a hundred and forty million albums. Its "Vertigo" tour made $389 million, second only to the Rolling Stones for a single-tour gross. In 2005, I saw the band on that tour, at Madison Square Garden. Its mastery of rock theatre was obvious. A simple but gorgeous stage set flanked the performers with big curtains of circular pendants that formed an illuminated screen. Even better, the stage flared into a big oval walkway limned with red lights that lit up as Bono ventured out along the loop, which gave the impression that he was on the rim of a volcano (without doing anything so crass as employing a mechanical volcano). Bono can stalk a sports arena like nobody else, shrinking the space by pulling you into the struggle he's engaged in while emphasizing how big the room is by throwing back his head and hollering to the rafters.

The bit that distracted me from the triumphant performance was the moment the band began to play "City of Blinding Lights," from "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb." The crowd went berserk, as it had been doing fairly consistently all night. (Many big arena shows hit a perceptible longueur somewhere around Hour 2, but U2's don't.) The audience was going perceptibly more berserk for this particular song. I realized that I was hearing, for the third or fourth time, the evening's loudest applause for a recent single. When the band played the first U2 song I ever encountered, 1980's "I Will Follow," the crowd seemed fairly happy, though in a slightly polite way. (This is the inverse of the "Satisfaction" effect, easily witnessed at any Stones show.) What other band, three decades into the game, gets its most intense audience reaction with new songs? There is no need to stage a legend Olympics between U2 and AC/DC and the Eagles and the Allman Brothers and the Stones—plenty of bands are holding up well into their rock-and-roll winter. But the only band of this vintage consistently generating new hits that bring in a younger crop of fans every five years is U2. What U2 song do my pre-teen sons know? "Vertigo," from 2004.

The band's first (but not its sole) legacy is its sound, easily identified within a few bars: a high, chiming guitar figure, usually simple in structure but fleshed out by the ringing of open strings and the doubling effect of a delay unit; a charging, near-military beat and bass line stretched out with a little extra swing; and singing that is defiant and loud and slightly weird. Yes, the band's most famous member is the least technically gifted, and the most influential, the guitarist David Evans, a.k.a. the Edge, is the least likely to pipe up in public. (Today, so many bands sneak little Edge motifs into their music that you can't keep count of the citations; it happens practically any time a guitarist goes high up on the neck and turns a brief ad-lib into the core of a song.)

For all his limitations—he's one of the last vocalists you can imagine making a solo record—Bono is the only singer who could possibly make U2's music succeed. The band has done relatively few cover versions, a tacit acknowledgment that its gift is peculiar and limited, despite its potency. Bono's voice can sound strained fairly quickly and isn't in the same league of instruments as that of Michael Stipe or Robert Plant, men with rich, deeply textured voices. Bono's gift is the ability to sound utterly immersed in and committed to whatever his band is proposing. He backs down from nothing that the band starts. That is how the band has held its place while teetering for decades on the cusp between self-righteous (perhaps the most common insult hurled at it, and at Bono) and euphoric.

The twelfth, and newest, studio album, "No Line on the Horizon," is something of an impromptu class reunion; U2's first three albums were produced by Steve Lillywhite, who ended up co-producing this album, joining in about a year into the process. The core of the album was produced and co-written with Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois, who have been working with the band since "The Unforgettable Fire," in 1984. After accepting an invitation to attend a festival of sacred music in Morocco, Bono asked the band and Eno and Lanois to come along and begin working together. The six-piece version of the band set up a studio in the open-air courtyard of a building in Fez, and began recording. Eighteen months later, after more recording and mixing in Dublin, London, and New York, the album was finally finished.

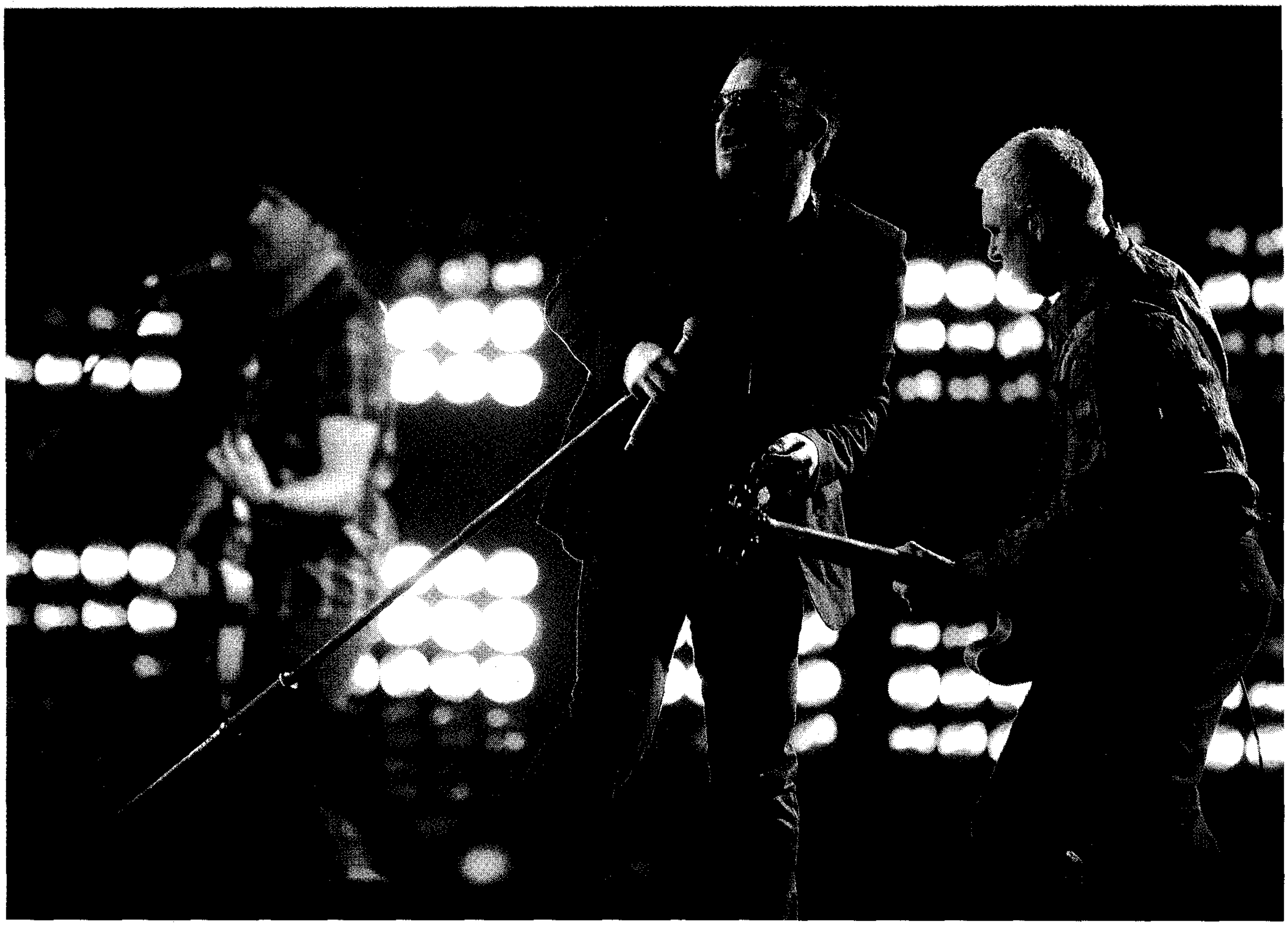
It's not surprising, then, that "No Line" is an album with no single sound or unifying theme. And, to a certain chunk of their fan base, the band's exploratory urges are what you sit through to get to the barn-burning songs like "Beautiful Day" and "Pride (In the Name of Love)" and "Vertigo." But, in collaboration with Lanois and Eno, U2 has created its consistent brand of big hurrahs while also enthusiastically goofing around. Some of the band's biggest and best numbers have nothing to do with the flag-waving, wall-levelling part of its sound. In a U.K. poll conducted several years ago, the band's slower, spiritual song "One," which is so basic it sounds almost like a traditional ballad, was voted the greatest song ever recorded. It isn't, but it's a model of simplicity and unfussy positivity, which is the band's real signature. Partisans credit Bono's Christianity, though that doesn't account for the way the band—and it plays very much as a band—manages to make both the hurrahs and the goofs sound like moral victories, even if the song is about a town where the streets have no name. While almost every rock band flirts with the allure of destruction and the charms of sin, U2 has kept its eye on that corniest of feelings: uplift.

You'd have to be somewhat Grinchy to resist the optimism at the heart of even a wobbly U2 album like "No Line on the Horizon." The first single, "Get On Your Boots," is a sort of adorable blunder. The fun parts are the fairly obvious main riff, which could have been lifted from any blues-rock band in the seventies, and a gauzy, psychedelic chorus that could have been stolen from any of the band's eighties contemporaries. (Siouxsie and the Banshees come to mind.) The rest of the song is Bono speed-reading a mishmash of lyrics to the cadence of Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." What is it all about? Perhaps just sexy boots? Fine—it will fit in nicely between two slower numbers.

Many of the missteps on "No Line" can be attributed to odd choices of lyrics. "Unknown Caller" is in the mode of U2's more hushed work, like "The Joshua Tree," with Bono inching into a more restricted, less chest-beating style. Then, perhaps at the urging of Eno, who is credited with co-writing the song's lyrics, the band starts to chant phrases from digital life, all together: "Force quit! And move to trash! . . . Password! You enter here!" It has the unfortunate feeling of Dad forwarding a page of e-mail jokes. (Yes, Dad, those are all computer words. Yes, I had seen them before, but I really liked reading them again.)

The pleasure of "No Line" is the richness of the stuff itself. The rock-solid "All That You Can't Leave Behind," from 2000, felt like a greatest-hits album before the fact, focussed on songs that wasted no moves and kept close to the tracks. "No Line on the Horizon" has both the what-the-hell feeling of the nineties albums that channelled bits and pieces of dance music and the meditative, warm sound of the late-eighties albums that made U2 enormous in the first place. Only a few songs feel like future hits.

The title track is a wonderfully rowdy combination of Larry Mullen's drumming, as looped by Eno, and cascading guitars and piano that set up a sneaky, low chorus that inverts the U2 buildup, leaving the verse as the mightier of the two parts. "White as Snow" is a gentle, modest gem that sets the imagined thoughts of a dying soldier to a variation of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," and "Moment of Surrender" is Bono in the emotional moment that is genuinely his now: scrabbling after some kind of clarity with enough determination to keep going for hours, though you know he'll stop before it goes on too long. (Seven minutes, however, is pretty long for recent U2.) "No Line" works precisely because it doesn't try too hard to add to the band's pile of epic moments. This album is a long dinner with old friends, all of whom love each other, most of whom are born talkers, and some of whom hold the floor for too long. Not every anecdote holds up, and some of the food belongs, untouched, on the edge of your plate. But it would be small-minded to leave before the whole warm, rambling night is over. ♦


*While most rock bands flirt with the allure of destruction and the charms of sin, U2 has kept its eye on that corniest of feelings: uplift.*

DYLAN MARTINEZ/REUTERS/LANDOV

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Sasha Frere-Jones's pop-music blog.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

# CHANGING PLACES

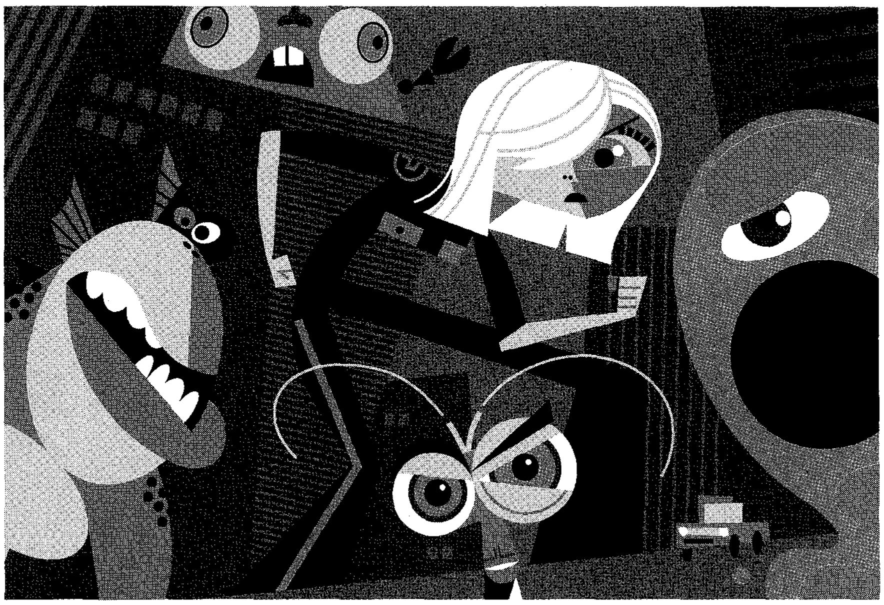
*“Monsters vs. Aliens” and “Shall We Kiss?”*

BY ANTHONY LANE

To what period does “Monsters vs. Aliens” belong? It is set in the present day, but its snout is pointed proudly at the future. The skills it employs, in its capacity as the latest animated feature from DreamWorks, could not be more gleamingly new. Yet something about this movie suggests that it was made by people who have never, deep down, accepted the fact that America has moved on from the nineteen-fifties—from the days in which Saturday night meant gazing through your windshield at “Attack of the 50 Foot Woman.” In short, she’s back, and this time she’s digital.

At the beginning, she is a female of regular size, by the name of Susan. We start on her wedding day, in Fresno. (I love the way that, not unlike the cosmos, the imagination of companies like DreamWorks is infinite yet bounded; they have all God’s creation to juggle with, but, given the choice, they prefer not to leave California.) Susan is marrying Derek—jerk by nature, TV weatherman by trade. Shortly before the ceremony, the bride is struck by a meteorite, which causes her to glow apple-green and swell upward in front of the congregation. “You’re shrinking,” she cries as she rises. Congratulations to whichever of the five screenwriters came up with *that* line. Lewis Carroll would be proud of you.

No sooner has Susan’s head burst through the church roof than she is captured by the Army and removed to a secure facility, where, to her dismay, she is stored as a potential weapon of war—a “rare female monster,” according to the general in charge of the program, who may be too young to remember Bette Davis. Susan takes her place amid a batch of other beasts, all commandeered by the state: a white-coated scientist with the manners of a Noël Coward hero but, sadly, the head of a bug; a pupa as vast as a blimp; a leering, bipedal iguana of boundless, not to say pointless, enthusiasm; and a blob. No sooner have these characters been introduced than, by a slightly creaking coincidence, the enemy enters the scene. Gallaxhar, an evil octopoid from far, far away, dispatches what appears to be a giant fire hydrant, which then stomps around San Francisco, and which the monsters must engage and destroy athwart the Golden Gate Bridge. By way of a backup, Gallaxhar assembles a force of identical drones, whose sole, remorseless impulse is to conquer the world. Why pay to see this movie, you might ask, when you can stay home and watch “America’s Next Top Model” and get the same plot for free?



*A giant female teams up with a blob and other beasts in DreamWorks’ new movie.*

PABLO LOBATO

The movie is co-directed by Conrad Vernon and Rob Letterman, who made “Shrek 2” and “Shark Tale,” respectively. I was repelled by both those films, which took in-jokes to the verge of implosion, and by their grovelling nods to the actors behind the voice-overs—the Will Smith fish had fins like protruding ears, the Martin Scorsese one had eyebrows, and so on. “Monsters vs. Aliens,” I am glad to report, shakes off that complacency; although the narrative makes a minimum of sense, the whole thing feels fresher than recent DreamWorks outings. Actors like Reese Witherspoon, as Susan, and Hugh Laurie, as the bughead, deliver their lines without obtruding too far, and the cheerfully brainless tones of Seth Rogen are such an exact match for the blob that he may never return to live action. Meanwhile, the set pieces—Susan roller-skating down San Francisco’s hills, for example, using cars as skates—are carried off with the kind of frantic naïveté that the studio was in danger of disdaining, and to which even today’s children are innately geared to respond.

Not, heaven knows, that the film is lost for references. When Susan is renamed Ginormica by the authorities, does that in any way heighten her powers, or does it merely betray her origins as a B-movie conceit? By the end, I had given up taking notes on the story and was simply scribbling down the titles that it winks at, among them “The Fly,” “E.T.,” “Jaws,” “Dr. Strangelove,” “King Kong,” “Gulliver’s Travels,” “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” and, yes, “The Blob.” Yet the impression left by the mayhem is not one of knowingness—as was the case with the Shrek franchise, say, when it rifled through every fairy tale in the book—but one of talismanic glee, with the filmmakers touching older tales for good luck as they pass by. There is even a pleasing, proto-feminist trace of Disney’s “Beauty and the Beast," as Susan displays a Belle-like impatience with her fiancé and, by extension, with men in general. The human males in "Monsters vs. Aliens" are either loudmouths or wimps; in a short scene involving a courting couple, the girl ends up carrying her hobbled beau as if he were a blushing bride.

Yet all is not well in this picture, because, in what some will greet as its boldest retro move and others will deride as vainglorious whimsy, it comes in 3-D. Not filmed in two dimensions and then projected in three, as is traditionally the practice, but shot in three. (And in cinemas without the right equipment it will be screened in two. Got that?) In a recent interview, Jeffrey Katzenberg, the C.E.O. of DreamWorks, explained the new method. "We use something called InTru3D, which combines DreamWorks Animation's authoring tools with the latest Intel technology, allowing artists to tell a more compelling story and give filmgoers a more exciting, immersive 3-D movie experience," he said. I am not quite sure what an "authoring tool" is, unless we are discussing the life and works of the late Lord Byron, but, as I took off my gray-lensed 3-D spectacles at the end of "Monsters vs. Aliens," I felt not so much immersed as fuzzy with exhaustion. What I had seen struck me less as a herald of shining possibility than as a thrill ride back to the future—back, that is, to an idea of the future, and a stale one at that.

If movie nuts still jabber on about "Citizen Kane," over the groans of the ordinary viewer, that is partly because the technical advances of Orson Welles's movie seemed at the time, and continue to seem, like the bestowals of further meaning; when rooms, and the people they contained, became visible in unprecedented depth of field, something felt enriched and burnished in our apprehension of the social scene, and of the lonely soul marooned within it. Compared with that revelation, the history of 3-D is no more than an elasticating trick. "Monsters vs. Aliens," though spirited stuff, does not buck the trend; it is fun to have a flaming meteor apparently vanish up your left nostril, but you aren't really engulfed. You are wowed, and wows last no longer than the striking of a match. If this movie matters, therefore, it is not for its own sake but because it prepares the way. Later this year, James Cameron will release "Avatar," a science-fiction drama starring Sigourney Weaver, in 3-D, and that will be the test. Cameron did more with two-dimensional special effects in "Terminator 2" than anyone before him, and so, if he can't conjure depth and dread from an extra dimension, nobody can. Ripley vs. Ginormica? We shall see.

There must be ways in which "Shall We Kiss?" could be made more French than it already is, but, short of adding a cancan sequence, I can't think of any just now. The movie is written and directed by Emmanuel Mouret, who also stars, and gets to take his clothes off next to Virginie Ledoyen. In case this sounds like a filmmaker tipping the scales in his own favor, I should point out that Mouret plays Nicolas, a lily-livered, gap-toothed math teacher, so you could argue that he is correcting the balance. There is a touch of Woody Allen in his persona, though when it comes to bodily confidence he makes Woody look like Victor Mature. At one point, Nicolas visits a prostitute who is almost as mousy as he is; when she asks him to take a shower before sex, he inquires, "Do I have to wash my hair?"

There are two stories here, one framed inside the other—a very nineteenth-century device. In the outer one, a picture-framer (his profession is no accident) begs a woman he barely knows for "a kiss without consequences." In refusing, she tells him the cautionary tale of Nicolas, who, lacking affection, suggests to a married friend named Judith (Ledoyen) that she meet his needs. This being Paris, Judith concurs, and, as you might expect, the no-strings encounter turns out to be tied up in strings of every sort. What our picture-framer learns is that the inconsequential kiss does not exist, and what we learn, as the jokes fade from the movie in the second half, is that beneath Mouret's goofy ditherings is an unremitting moralist, gripped by the ethics of temptation. Hence the bleached and bloodless hues of Judith's apartment, and the coolly abstract look of her lovemaking, with its closeups of a pale hand against black fabric; hence, too, the level tone in which she, Nicolas, and her husband—a Schubert-revering pharmacist, who reads Leopardi in bed—tend to utter their lines as if reciting from a book. The result is that "Shall We Kiss?" puts its viewers in a bind worthy of the lovers themselves: should we organize a Socratic symposium on the issues raised by the film, or hurl our popcorn violently at the screen? ♦

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The Front Row, a blog about movies.

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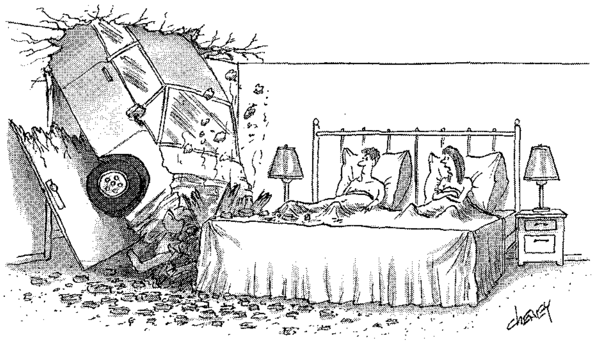
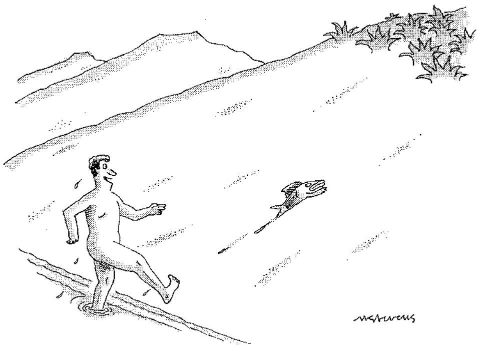
# CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Charles Barsotti, must be received by Sunday, April 5th. Finalists in the March 23rd contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 20th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.*

## THE WINNING CAPTION



*"Well, at least he made curfew."*
Andrea Fidurko, Needham, Mass.



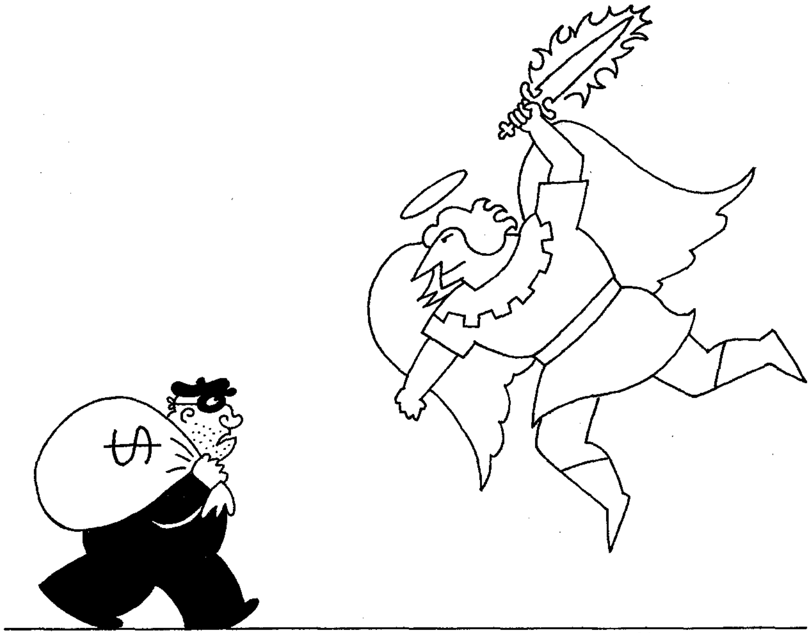
## THE FINALISTS

*"Now that I've met your family, I want you to meet mine."*
Ben Russak, Carlsbad, Calif.

*"You're in trouble when we get to the bicycles."*
John Kinde, Las Vegas, Nev.

*"Hi there! Can I interest you in some promotional material about intelligent design?"*
Aaron Adler, New York City

## THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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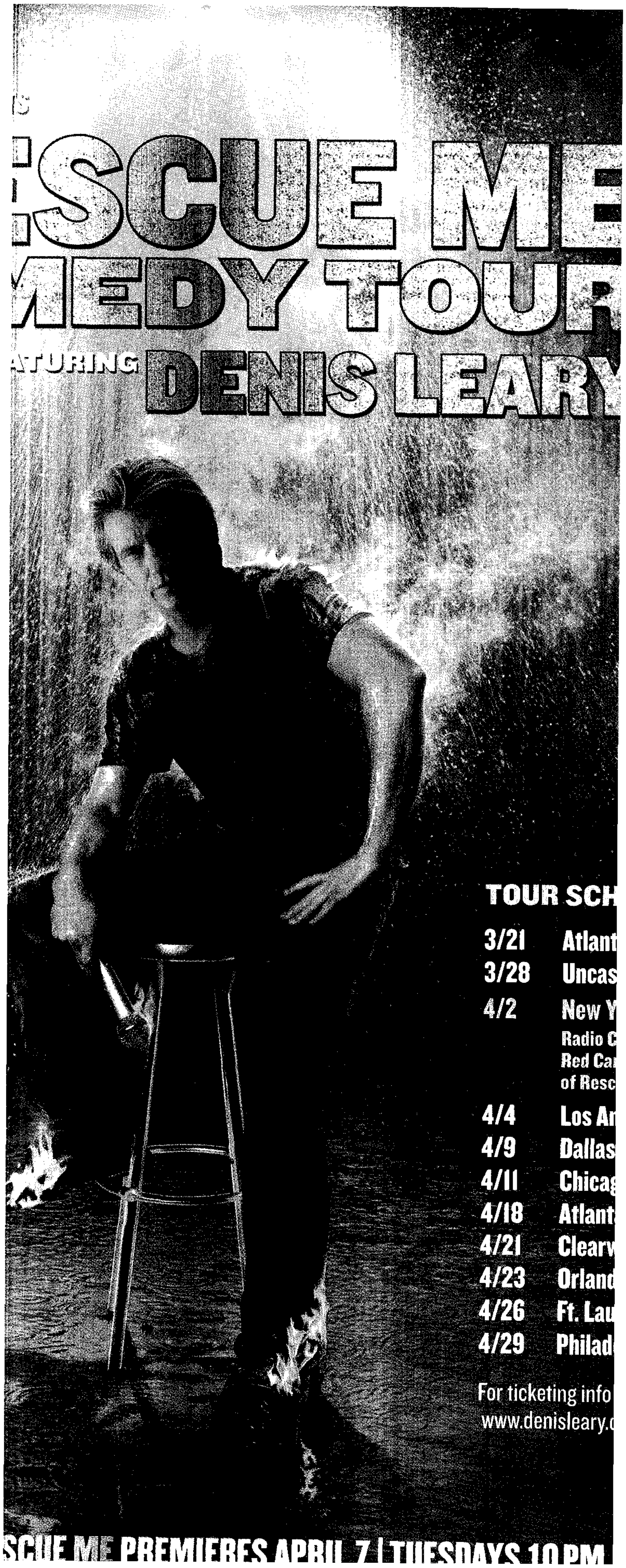

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